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STORY MAGAZINE

COLT QUEEN OF THE OWL-HOOT RANGE
by ROLLIN BROWN

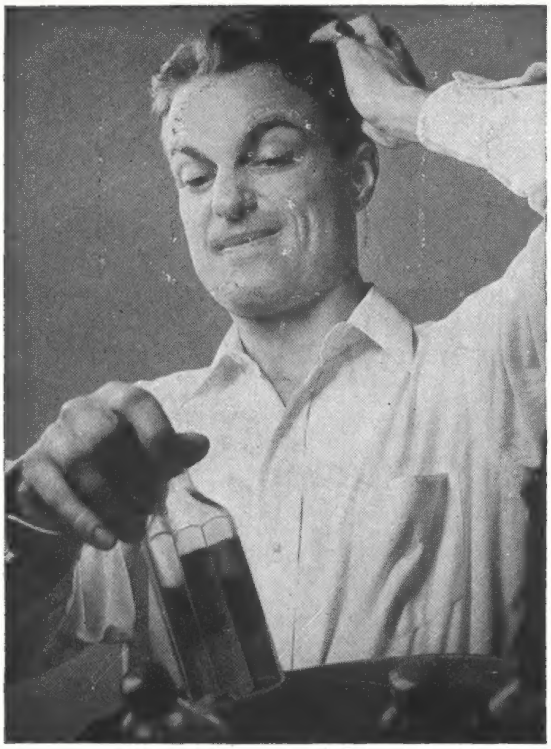
LOCO GUNS
by WALT COBURN

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

BOOTHILL CORRAL
by EDGAR L. COOPER

BLOOD ON THE STAR
by BART CASSIDY

LONGHORN GREED
by JAY J. KALEZ



BOB WAS FOOLED . . . he thought he could get rid of those distressing flakes and scales with one application of some overnight remedy. He found, however, that it required persistent treatment, and used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice daily to fight the condition. Now his scalp feels "like a million."

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If you wish more evidence, add to the above the constant stream of letters from people who use Listerine Antiseptic at home. They're overjoyed with the way Listerine gets after the symptoms of infectious dandruff.

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Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

Lariat
STORY MAGAZINE

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

TWO COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELS

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THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

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Dept. 2JM, National Radio Institute
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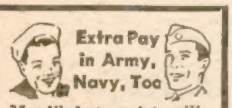

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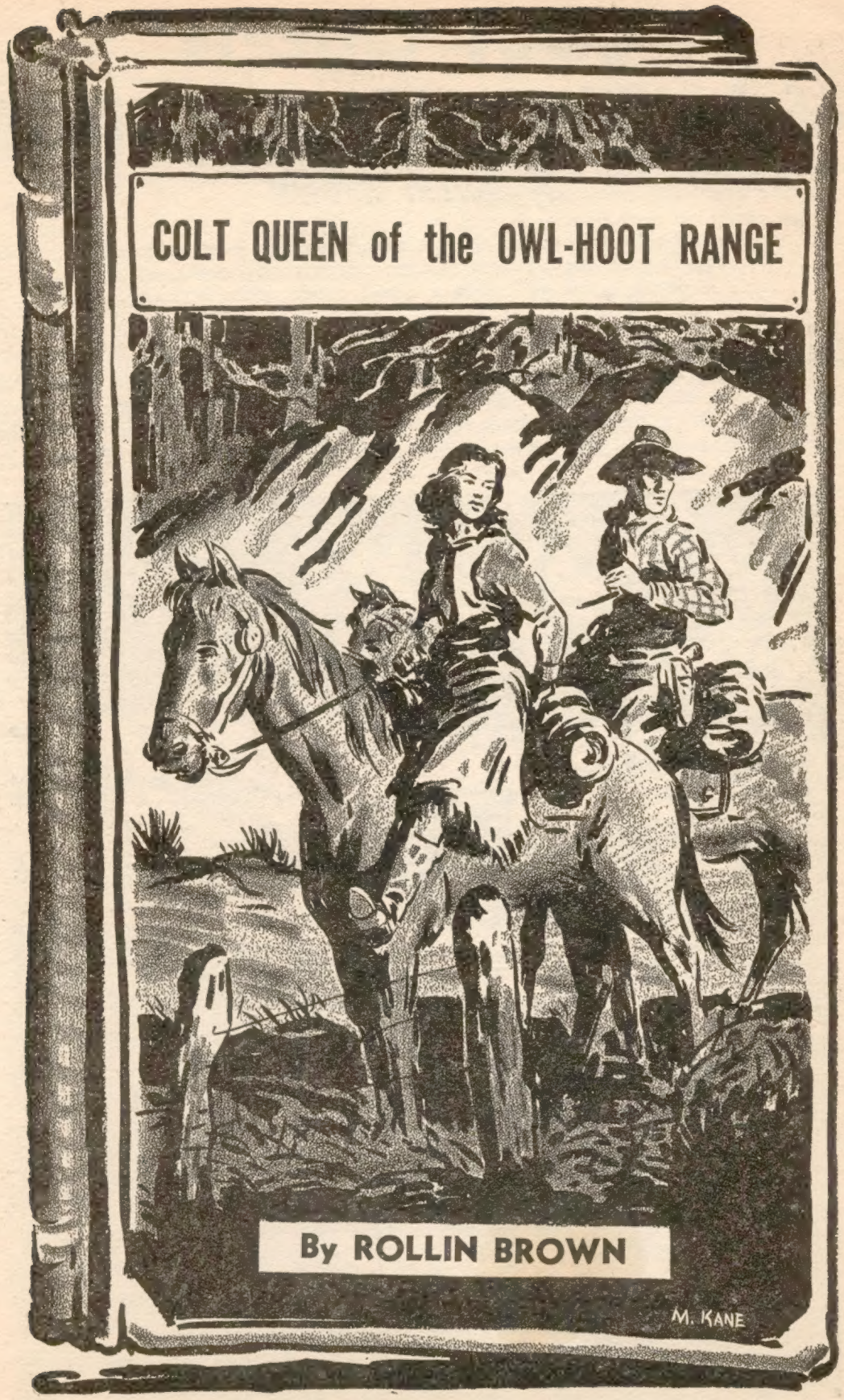
COLT QUEEN of the OWL-HOOT RANGE



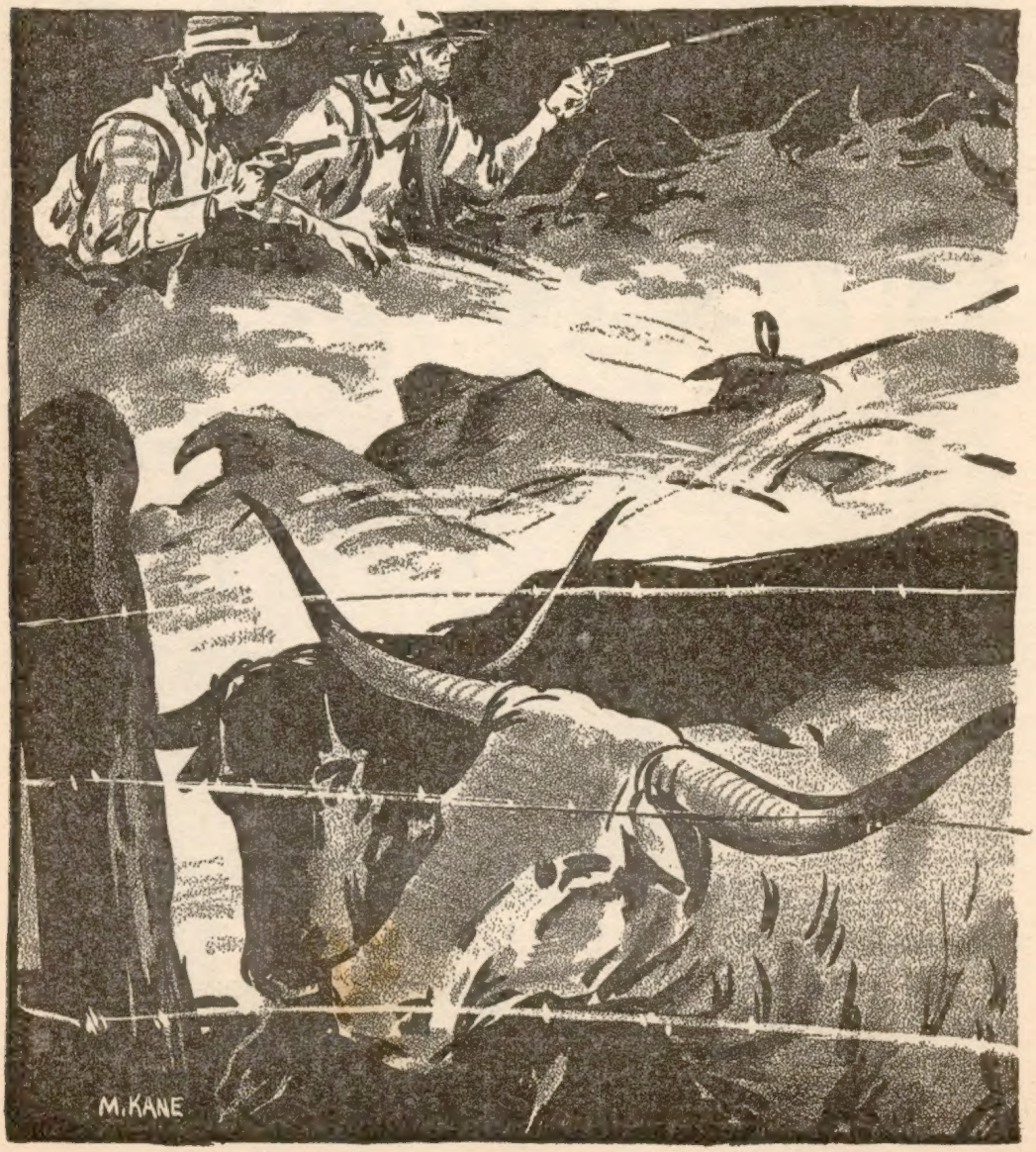
COLT QUEEN of the OWL-HOOT RANGE

By ROLLIN BROWN

A dead horse at the sheep-tracked crossing gave Sutton plain warning of war. Cattle vanished by night, and a smoky-eyed girl rode a ghost range, rifle in hand.

A Complete Western Novel

TOM SUTTON left the ridge rocks and came down into Flatwillow Creek about three o'clock in the morning, pushing a dog-tired horse toward the sandy, nearly dry ford. There had been no moon to light his way through the miles of rough country he had crossed that night with the Warbonnet Peaks rising



always higher before him, black against the sky. But here in the dim starlight of the creek he could see the meadows of the old Mathieu strip opening off into the hills and the close, dark edge of timber across banks. Some stirring of caution stopped him then and held him in the saddle for a long moment before Sutton climbed down, stiff and weary, at the ford.

Hunkered over the ground, the first match he struck fizzled out between his numb, cold fingers. But the light of a second and a third, shielded in his hands, told him all he needed to know. More than fifty miles of steady riding lay behind him now since he had left Grant's Crossing late yesterday with word that sheep had crossed the Tonquin rim hills three days ago bringing him homeward without pause. The dull flicker of light in his hands showed the bank ground of the ford trampled with a maze of sheep track over which the more recent broad-rimmed wheel marks of a wagon were clearly defined.

"Headed across into the old Mathieu place," Sutton told himself. "Maybe no more than four-five hundred starved weaklings in the flock. But I reckon that's enough."

Six years of running cattle in the Tonquin Basin had taught him all its old feuds and range alliances as well as the meaning of trouble. Scant grass and the continuing drouth since spring had broken the market and hurt the cattlemen everywhere, and put his own back up against a wall. But all across the high intermountain plateau land to the east the situation was much worse; springs and streams were finally drying up out there, forcing countless sheepmen to move. In the five days he had spent at Grant's Crossing, trying, without success, to raise enough money to stave off the Basin Wells bank and keep himself in the cattle business till another year, Sutton judged that he had counted twenty dusty flocks straggling through from the east in search of grass.

The match he held singed Sutton's fingers and he dropped it underfoot. Then, in the dark, he stumbled against something, brought up hard, and the flare of another low-held match disclosed the body of a dead horse lying there beside the bank. He could see the sweat marks where harness had been stripped from the animal, but no brand that he recognized before the flame burned out. Something stirred among the near creek-edge willows.

A voice that Sutton recognized said quietly, "Might be a good idea, Tom, not to strike no more matches. Somebody might figure it for an excuse to take a shot at you tonight."

Sutton's hand eased away from the gun butt at his hip. He watched the man who had spoken move from the willows, leading his mount along the bank of the ford. The man was lean and gnarled and a little stooped in the starlight with the brim of his Stetson laying a solid blackness over his face. But it was a face that Sutton knew intimately from the many times he had ridden this basin land in company with Clint Tilton. Tilton had owned one of the small outfits among the timbered hills, running forty or fifty head of cattle, till over-crowding from the Pressler iron on one hand and the drouth

had pinched him out. From the wreck Clint had saved a couple of riding horses and his saddle-gear, nothing else.

"Wasn't quite sure who you was at first," Clint Tilton explained. "Not till you struck that last match. You just now gettin' home from the Crossin', Tom?"

Sutton said, "Just back from a last talk with Sam Workman. He turned me down in the end. What's been happening here, Clint?"

"You mean the sheep track? Or the dead hoss?" Clint asked. "Well, both go together; both belong to the same outfit. There's half a thousand head of woollies yonder on the Mathieu strip tonight. Come in across the rim hills to the east, follow in' the Basin Wells road." Tilton paused, listening for a moment to the silence along the creek. "Maybe it don't make no difference," he continued. "But I seen one cow-sheep war over on the Horn River, twenty years ago. It started from no more than this. Never been no sheep in this country before."

BUT there had been other trouble here. Years ago two cow outfits had fought over this ground along Flatwillow Creek. By daylight the roof of the old Mathieu house, abandoned since that time, could be seen plainly from the ford. That old trouble had arisen between the Presslers and Jake Mathieu over grass and boundary lines along the creek, and in the end Mathieu had left the country with a bullet lodged in his chest. It was said that shot had found its mark through a window of the old house, and riders sent in later to gather Mathieu cattle never took out more than half. When he had first come into the basin six years ago, Sutton could remember seeing an occasional Long M cow on the range, usually with that brand blotched or otherwise disfigured.

He said, "What move has Raff Pressler made?"

"Well, that all depends," Clint answered. "Sheep crossed the ford here two days ago. Then yesterday one of the men with a girl on the wagon seat beside him come back this way, drivin' into Basin Wells after a load of salt for the sheep and some provisions. Here at the ford one of the team hitched to their wagon give out on 'em. Blind staggers. From the looks of it, this sheep outfit had been havin' a hard time all along. The sheepman worked with his hoss a while, tryin' to get it up again, but finally had to shoot the beast."

"That's the dead hoss yonder?"

"Yes." Clint stirred a little in the starlight, turning his head. "Afterwards the man either walked over to your place and got that big bay work hoss of yours to hitch in beside his other animal, or the bay had strayed over this way. That part of it ain't yet quite plain. The sheepman claims he only intended to borrow the bay, drivin' it into Basin Wells where he could buy another hoss. But in town Pressler and some others noticed the bay and got Jesse Cotter to take the man into custody on suspicion of hoss theft. Since then Cotter's had him behind bars, waitin' for you to come home and either clear him or file charges. The sheepman's name is Trent."

"Never heard of him," Sutton said. He thought this over. "What's against taking the man's own word for it? He wouldn't try to steal a horse that way."

"Raff Pressler's against it," Tilton said. "Pressler wants the man behind bars and the other cowmen back him up. T Slash T and Triangle 8 and the rest. The girl walked back here alone last night. The other sheepman—or maybe he's just the herder—is still with the flock."

"What're they doing on the Mathieu place?"

"Trent claims he's got some kind of a right there," Tilton muttered. "I don't yet know what's blowin' in the wind, but there was a meetin' at the Pressler ranch tonight. Riders been dustin' up the roads all over the basin since last afternoon. Me, I been drifting around, waitin' to see what the next move would be. *Lissen—*"

Tilton stood stock-still in the night, his head cocked over on one side. Half a moment passed before Sutton heard the small click of a hoof against rock in the farther night, and presently the vague shape of a rider came moving out of the timber across creek. Clint had turned, making no sound at all as he climbed into the saddle and sought the black fringe of the willows once more.

The rider across creek drifted out into the open, a dim, blurred figure, and at

the same time a steady pound of hoofs along the road beyond began to carry through the night. Dust spread down from the farther timber there, palely visible as fog in the starlight, and came running on toward the ford. The first rider quartered across into the road, and Sutton could darkly discern the pack of coming horsemen halting when they met.

A deep-toned voice inquired, "Everything all right, Harvey?"

"Everything, I guess," the rider replied. "Back in the timber a while ago, I thought I seen the flare of a match here at the ford. But nobody come across."

Hooves came on. Sutton held his mount in the willows beside Tilton. Through the trample, another voice said, "Well, it's a job that's got to be done, ain't it? Let's get at it. Dawn ain't far off." Horses hit the loose bank ground and gravel, clattering through the ford.

There were ten or twelve saddlemen in that dark, compact group, veering off across the Mathieu meadows now with the sound of hooves diminishing and a lingering smell of dust in the night. Tilton wheeled his horse about, muttering something under his breath. Sutton was already pushing out of the willows.

"Let's get it straight and see what this means, Clint."

They followed dust and the beat of hooves across the meadow land for a long ten minutes. Dark timber showed out now on either hand where the valley bottom narrowed in; then abruptly lack of any sound in the night ahead stopped them. Several moments after that riders began to break off through the brush and timber to the left, and it was plain that the party had divided after some low-voiced parley. Tilton silently swung his mount that way and disappeared, and Sutton rode ahead once more, moving at a cautious walk. He could still hear the riders Clint followed climbing a low ridge to the left, but had lost the others. He reached the edge of scattered timber due ahead, wary of meeting some guard left here on the bottom ground.

He paused again and listened, unable to hear any sound in the night now. Dawn was just beginning to show a first thin, diffused streak of gray over the eastward hills, and he cut straight on toward the old Mathieu house. Presently the dark roof-peak of the building took form against the pale light in the sky. For all the years since that old conflict which had spelled the end of the Mathieu brand in the basin, the house had been standing deserted here, a gaunt and weather-beaten structure with cracked and shattered windows that overlooked the sweep of lower meadows and Flatwillow Creek.

Drifting riders, seeking shelter from some storm or stopping at the place overnight, had spread a litter of rusty tin cans and broken bottles about the house. Old furniture within had been broken up for firewood, and scrawled initials, brands and messages had been scratched over the livingroom walls. But once the house had been pretentious, and Sutton could remember wandering through the place one day, shoving open a closet door upstairs and stumbling over a small, dust-covered chest that was filled with some child's long-forgotten toys. He had wondered often since what the abandonment of this home had meant to that child.

There was no sign about the place that the house had been tenanted these past two days. Sutton was quartering past the sagged old front porch when a voice reached out of the shadows there:

"Stop where you are, rider. Don't come any nearer!"

HE could tell it was a woman and that she was scared. Thin gray light from the east caught and glinted on the barrel of a rifle held in her hands, and Sutton could dimly distinguish the girl's figure now, backed up against the side of the house. She edged out a step or two across the porch, holding the rifle leveled, and he had an impression that she was slim and rather tall with dark hair spilled loose around her shoulders. More than that he could not see.

Then before he could speak, she asked with a quick eagerness, "Did you come from town?"

"From Basin Wells, you mean?"

"From the jail there. From Sheriff Cotter," she said. "He promised yesterday to send me word as soon as he knew what was going to happen."

Sutton kept the pitch of his voice low. "No," he said, "I haven't seen Cotter

lately. I run cattle across on the other side of Flatwillow Creek. My name's Sutton."

He heard a gasp.

"Then it was your horse we used?"

He nodded in the darkness. I just got home from Grant's Crossing tonight, just heard about it," he told her. "Basin Wells is strictly a cowtown and you've got to remember that. But there won't be any charges over the horse. I'll ride into town this morning and see to it. You don't own the sheep?"

"No, they belong to my uncle Ed Trent. And Frenchy. There's no grass to the east, not even water," she explained. "They've had to sell more than two thousand head for what they would bring, and couldn't even find a buyer for the rest. Springs and streams and finally even the dug wells are drying up out there. It was either drive the sheep and find new range or let them starve."

"What made your uncle think he could graze sheep on the Mathieu place?"

Her face made a pale, indistinct oval framed by her dark hair in the coming light. "I'm Laura Mathieu," she answered. "Years ago my father ran cattle here, before he had trouble with the Presslers." Bitterness edged her voice. "The Mathieu place belongs to me. I was born in this old house—and I've come back to stay."

Sutton said, "I see." This made the whole thing more or less plain. He was sitting sidewise in the saddle, studying her through the gloom when the pounding run of horses' hoofs came traveling down through the timber to their ears. A rider's strident yell carried wildly above the other noise, followed by a gunshot. And in that instant Tom Sutton also knew what had brought that large party of riders across Flatwillow Creek tonight.

The girl had whirled with the lowered rifle lifted again. He said, "Wait here! Don't leave the house." But as he raked his horse with the spurs and looked back once, she was running out from the corner of the old porch. The whip of a low-hanging branch slashed across his face and he dropped down over the saddle. From the valley head beyond guns began quick bursts of firing. Sutton ran through the timber here, reached a brief opening and traveled on across it.

Dust rose against the dawn light ahead in a thick cloud. Hoarse shouts and yells, the bleat and bawling of running sheep and the fierce yapping of several dogs swelled through the racket of gunfire. The brush wall of a temporary sheep pen crashed. Visible now, the muzzle flash of a gun cut bright-edged streaks against the gray half-light. The clamor and confusion and the steady noise of shooting spread off to the east. Dust billowed up in front of Sutton's face.

His mount shied violently; a few scattered sheep ran past. Brush crackled underhoof. His animal stumbled over a log salt trough, and Sutton stopped and circled once about this spot where the flock had been held. He could see a small wall tent ripped to ribbons on the ground, near the embers of a burned-out, smoldering fire. Nothing else. He swung off to the right, finding an increased number of woolly forms, both the dead and the dying, spaced across this ground where the guns had got to work. The main part of the flock was still running off that way, the shooting and uproar undiminished.

He crossed a shallow gully, blinded again by the dust. Within another three or four hundred yards the sounds ahead changed suddenly, and a moment after that Sutton hit the farther timber. Riders were breaking through beyond, shouting, but the shooting slackened abruptly. Piney dust rose from the forest floor. Sheep were everywhere, scattered and running through the undergrowth with a bewildered bleating, but offering little target here. Several riders came crashing back, passing off on Sutton's left. A man cursed thickly, and farther off a single gun exploded with spaced shots.

"All right, all right!" a voice rose from the timber edge, rallying these riders. "That's enough for tonight."

The party gathered, and afterwards Sutton heard hoofs drum off to the southward. Dawn, streaking up from the east, was turning the sky a pearly gray over the black timber. Dust still lingered in thin stringers over the bottom flats. On his way back to the ruined sheep pen Sutton could see the damage that had been done. Woolly carcasses, dirty gray lumps in the dawn, were strewn along the route. He knew there had been dogs and a herder

with the flock, and rode to search along that shallow gully he had crossed just east of the sheep camp.

A dog rose from the ground ahead, crouched and growling. In the bottom of the gully lay a lank, bearded man, his legs crumpled under him. The girl from the Mathieu house porch was bending over him, the rifle she had carried leaned against the bank. She looked up, making a grab for the rifle, and then recognized Sutton. He got down from the saddle and squatted on his heels beside the man.

"Your uncle's partner—Frenchy?"

She answered shortly, "Yes."

There was a long swollen lump on the top of the man's head, but he was breathing with a choked, audible sound. Sutton walked across to the sheep camp, searched and kicked around, and finally discovered a battered canteen that had escaped the hoofs under the ripped canvas of the tent. He carried the canteen back and spilled water on the sheepherder's face. The man stirred now and groaned. Sutton lifted his head, feeling the bruise.

"Some rider ran him down. Slugged him from the saddle with a gun barrel," he said.

The girl's face was set. "It was a trick—all that business that happened yesterday. They wanted to get Uncle Ed out of the way, so there'd only be Frenchy to deal with tonight. Any old trumped-up charge, like a stolen horse, would do!"

Sutton said, "Looks that way."

"You're one of them," she flared at him. "You run cattle here like the rest. T Slash T, Triangle 8—they both stood by and watched the Presslers fight my father. Now you're all ranging the Mathieu grass."

"Strays from all over the basin drift in here," Sutton said. "Yes, that's true."

He could see her features plainly in this light, the full line of her mouth and finely arched brows and eyes that anger stirred to a deep, cloudy blue. He liked the contrast of her eyes and smoky dark hair, and he liked spirit in a woman as well as a man. The movement of the sheepherder, Frenchy, drew his eyes from her face.

Sutton tilted up the canteen again, and presently helped the shepherd to his feet. Whimpering, the sheepdog licked Frenchy's clenched hands, while the man stared wildly at the ruin about him.

"I'll see that your uncle gets out of jail this morning," Sutton told the girl. "I can't promise anything more than that. You'd better get more help or quit the basin."

II

CLINT TILTON came in sight through the timber as Sutton crossed into the meadows below the old house. Clint was moving across from the east, his horse heavily sweated over the chest and flanks. He fell into pace at Sutton's side. They rode back toward the creek.

"Well, you had your look," Clint Tilton said. "How many sheep did they get?"

Sutton said, "Enough. I'm a cowman, Clint; I always been. But a dozen riders against one herder in the dawn-dark and a girl that's got every right to run sheep on the Mathieu place—it don't fit in. It ain't my style; I don't like it."

"So what?" Clint asked.

They crossed the sandy ford and briefly swung into the road toward Basin Wells. Midway up the farther timbered slope, Sutton took the lead and turned aside into a narrow trail. The trail climbed steeply up the ridge, weaving its way through the big spruce and pines, and came into open top land where a few head of cattle ranged the grass. To the west morning sunlight struck the Warbonnet Peaks, outlining those high rocky summits and distant mountain shoulders. Sutton crossed the ridge and drifted down into another valley head. He climbed from saddle and opened a wire gate.

"So what?" he repeated Tilton's question. "I don't know, Clint. I staked every hope I had on raising a loan from Sam Workman at the Crossing which would pay off what I owe the Basin Wells bank here. The bank wants its money. and there was no other way to save most of my stock. Workman's backed a lot of outfits and a lot of cowmen, but he turned me down flat. So now I got to gather two hundred head of cattle and sell 'em on this market, and do it mighty fast. It'll take that many to raise the $4,000 I need; and I ain't got much more than three hundred head on range and no calf crop at

all, seems like. It will just about clean me out."

"Sure," Clint Tilton said. "Raff Pressler's old man left him a sizable share of stock in the Basin Wells bank when he died four years back. When Pressler figures the time is right, he makes a motion and the bank closes down and Pressler gets a new slice of range somewhere. It works like that."

"Drouth makes hard times, Clint."

"And hard men. Seven-eight of the riders behind that sheep raid this mornin' was Pressler hands, includin' the two Barsal boys," Clint said. "Once Raff Pressler and his father fought Jake Mathieu, and Raff don't intend for anybody else to get that grass. He's runnin' two head for every one other outfits have along Flat-willow Creek right now, and only the lower end of the creek range belongs to him. But sheep put the rest of the cowmen solid behind him, backin' up any move he makes."

Below the wire gate in the fence, the valley head opened out into sloping flats. Sutton had fenced half a section of land in here. He sighted his horses down at the lower end of the field and circled around that way to drive the stock toward the corral. The big bay harness horse that he used for snaking in firewood and posts and such work about the place was missing from among the six head of saddle stock. At the corral he roped out a chunky sorrel and shifted his saddle from the mount he rode, following Clint up to the house.

Sutton had built this cabin solidly against the back hill slope, close to a narrow side ravine where water always seeped from rocky springs. The place had two rooms with a low attic, floored with puncheons, under the shake roof. Clint had already started a fire in the kitchen stove and was cutting into a slab of bacon. They ate breakfast at the table in the room.

"Well, how about it?" Sutton asked. "Want that job?"

"Helpin' you gather cattle," Clint said. "Sure. You got no choice about it. Where and when do we start?"

"You start over east this mornin', below Pressler's drift fence. We won't get any help from the rest of the outfits," Sutton told him. "Later I'll swing around through the middle hills. But first I got a job to do in town."

THE town was full of riders, Sutton saw, as the sorrel topped a last low swell of this rolling, timbered land and the street of Basin Wells was before him. This was around half-past eight or nine o'clock in the morning. The court house stood in the center of town, a square, wooden building which also housed the sheriff's office and the jail; and hitch racks fronting the square all held their share of idle, saddled horses. Sutton passed the livery stable on the edge of town, noticing that big bay work horse of his standing in the feed yard and a dilapidated wagon unhitched at the side of the street. He clip-clopped on toward the water trough at the court-house curb without hurry.

Callam's General Store and the dress-goods shop that Janice Wayne kept next door stood across street on his right now. Briefly, Sutton wondered how many times he had left his horse here at one of the racks while he talked or strolled across into the court-house square with Janice Wayne of an evening. A year ago and before that it had always been Tom Sutton who escorted Janice to Saturday night dances at the schoolhouse or any neighborhood festivities. But lately that had changed little by little, till now it was more often Ben Callam from the store next door who appeared with her at the dances or drove the basin roads in his shiny new buggy with Janice at his side.

The hoofs of the sorrel lifted small puffs of dust from the street. There was a kind of hot and breathless silence over this town where the drouth had been unbroken since early spring. Horses waiting at the hitch rails about the square sweated and switched at the flies, and men standing back along the plank-board walk or grouped together on the court-house steps did not move much. Heads had turned, watching Sutton from the moment he passed the livery stable, but there was no other stir. There was no talk.

This was the expected thing. At daybreak riders had raided the flock of sheep held on the Mathieu grass, as the whole town knew by this time. Since yester-

day the sheepman, Trent, had been held here in the court-house jail, taken into custody on suspicion of horse theft. And now Tom Sutton, the owner of that horse, had appeared, as expected, to make the next move.

Raff Pressler, high and big-shouldered, with his hat tilted back from his blunt-featured face, stood among his riders on the court-house steps with Dane Barsal beside him. Hands came and went on the Pressler ranch, few lasted long; but the Barsal brothers, Dane and Joe, were always on the ranch payroll. The brothers were dark-skinned, lank men with a family resemblance strongly marked in the narrow-spaced set of their eyes and identical long-jawed chins. There had been some ugly rumors about these two men in other days. It was said that Dane Barsal had received five hundred dollars for firing the shot that had resulted in Jake Mathieu's death those years ago.

Chris Johnson, of T Slash T, stood on the edge of the Pressler group. This, too, was significant, Sutton thought. It probably meant an open alliance now between the two big brands in the basin, with Triangle 8 always on Raff Pressler's side. T Slash T was a land and cattle corporation owned by outside investors, who, unfamiliar with range conditions, held their ranch foreman to blame whenever dividends fell short. Chris Johnson was the third such foreman at T Slash T in the past two years, and Johnson had a wife and family to think of.

Only Sheriff Jesse Cotter, coming from the court house, made any movement in this crowd of ranchmen and riders grouped on the court-house steps or standing out toward the street. The idle horses switched and sweated at the hitch rails. At the trough Sutton nodded impartially to the men before him and climbed from the saddle, removing the sorrel's bit so the animal could drink freely. Cotter paused at the foot of the court-house steps, and then came on across the walk to the trough.

"Been a little matter needin' your attention here in town, Tom," the sheriff said.

He was a paunchy man, soft-spoken and wooden-faced. His eyes met Sutton's with a glance that was neither hostile nor friendly. Sheriff Cotter was respected, but he had no friends. He was not as soft as he looked.

"Uh-huh. I heard about it," Sutton said. He slipped the bit back into the sorrel's mouth and tossed the reins over the near end of a hitch rack. He came around the trough to Cotter's side.

"County will prosecute if you want to make a case of it," the sheriff continued. "That's up to you. I can't hold a man on suspicion longer than overnight, and if you want it different you'll have to sign charges for a warrant. It was your horse."

The hot, breathless silence along the street increased. Raff Pressler, turning a little on the court-house steps, ground one bootheel into the wood underfoot and the noise of this sounded loud. Sutton leaned his hips back against the edge of the water trough. No one else moved.

"Uh-huh," Sutton said. "It's about eight weeks till the next session of county court. If this man Trent can't raise bail money, he'd be held in jail till then. In two months' time or a whole lot less, there won't be any sheep left on the Mathieu strip. The same riders that were out last night will tend to it. That's about the play, ain't it, Jesse?"

"I wouldn't know." Jesse Cotter's eyes remained expressionless. "I never try to foresee the future. The present keeps me too busy."

"The trouble is, I like to see cards pulled off the top of the deck. Not the bottom, Jesse. Even when dealing with sheepmen," Sutton said. His voice was flat. "There won't be any charges against the sheepman. So far as I know, Trent borrowed that bay horse of mine, the same way any cowman in the basin would have done in the same fix. Now you better let him out."

There was neither censure nor approval on Jesse Cotter's face. "It's up to you," he repeated, and turned away.

EYES watched Cotter move back to the court-house steps. Suddenly Raff Pressler swore a sharp, rasping word. A dozen men stirred all at once, shifting spurred bootheels on the steps or the old walk planks. Somebody said, "If the cowmen themselves don't hold together—" and

left the words hanging in the air like that. Pressler shoved past Cotter as though he didn't see the man with Dane Barsal close at his heels. Chris Johnson, of T Slash T, waited longer and came on with the pack of Pressler hands and a few Triangle 8 riders.

Rage built up in Pressler, crossing that short distance from the steps to the street edge, where Sutton remained standing by the water trough. He was a man of about Sutton's own age, deep-muscled through the shoulders, with a tall and solid power in him. Anger spread a dark flush over his blunt features and drew his lips in tight against his teeth.

Pressler said thickly, "Better think it over. The jail's in back, and it's going to take Cotter about sixty seconds to walk through the court house and give the jailer his orders. Sutton, you got that long to change your mind. Either you're with us or against us. This country ain't big enough for both cows and sheep—nor big enough to hold both you and me, I'm telling you, if you decide the wrong way!"

Sutton watched Jesse Cotter disappear inside the court house. "Has it ever been any different than that, Raff?" he asked.

"What d'you mean?"

"For six years now I've bucked the push of your cattle along Flatwillow Creek," Sutton told him. "At first it wasn't so bad; by close-ridin' my own range lines I managed to get along. But nothin' keeps hungry cattle back. I've watched you push stock off your own grass and onto other men's range each spring and save your own feed that way. I had to build fence to keep enough graze close to home for my own saddle stock. For every stray and drifter from other brands on the Mathieu strip, you've driven in twice that many head. Mostly big steers that should have been sold last year."

Between tight lips, Pressler said, "We're talkin' about sheep."

"This little flock of half-starved sheep don't make any difference." Sutton shook his head. "But another thing does. Once you and your father ran Jake Mathieu out, and now you don't aim to see any of the Mathieu kin get a fresh foothold there. Sheep give you an excuse to rouse the rest of the cowmen behind you. But what you want is Flatwillow Creek, the whole of it. And once you get it, you'll want the rest of the Tonquin Basin. Because you're made that way, Raff. The drouth's with you this year. I'd as soon make my own fight now as later."

"So it's like that?" Pressler stood on his high boot-heels, tilting back and forth a little, fists knotted at his sides. He was measuring Sutton and measuring something else with his thick-lidded eyes half closed. For a moment he made no other move. He said, "You've had your chance."

Sheriff Cotter reappeared in the court-house door with a shaggy, stoop-shouldered man at his side. Cotter stopped in the doorway. The sheepman caught sight of the group about the trough and halted part-way down the steps. Dane Barsal touched Pressler's arm with an elbow and nodded that way. Pressler swung half around. The sheepman came on down the steps, turning along front of the court house, and struck a sort of scurrying run toward the stable up the street.

Pressler watched till the man reached the corner above the square, forming some decision in this while. He wheeled on around, and said to his crew, "All right. Climb saddles. We can't waste the whole day here in town." He started off toward his mount at one of the hitch rails.

As he came back mounted along the street, he checked his horse beside the trough, looking down at Sutton.

"You're through!" he promised.

III

HOOFS left powder dust settling slowly in the street. Chris Johnson, with a couple of T Slash T men at his heels, rode south the other way, the last to mount, with Triangle 8's crew swinging east around the court-house corner ahead. Sutton had a feeling Johnson had been about to stop and linger for a word with him, but then had changed his mind. Johnson had his wife and family to think of and his job at T Slash T; and Sutton knew how all that was. The weight of three brands with their riding men had shifted against him. He walked on down the court-house side of the street and crossed to the Basin Wells bank on the opposite corner.

He put his head in through the doors

here, and said to a man behind the counter cage, "I'm starting to gather cattle right away. Ought to have your money inside two weeks, if the whole bottom don't fall out from under the market." He left it like that.

He was coming back up the street, passing the front of Ben Callam's store, before he noticed two pack horses tied at the rail there. He stopped and took another look at the animals, and saw Wade Ritter step from the store on the other hand just then. Ritter was a tall, raw-boned man with a short-cropped, iron-gray beard and eyes that were faded like the old cotton shirt he wore by much sun and weather. He was one of the few old-timers left in the country, ranging his cattle outside the basin through the roughs and dry land beyond the north rim. It was a big outfit, and Ritter took no part in the local basin's politics. Sutton had once worked for him.

"In town after some provisions, Wade?" His head met the old cowman's leathery grip. They shook. "I was a plannin' to drift over the ridge sometime soon, have a talk with you," Sutton said. "Want to drive cattle through your range to the Crossing. Maybe in about a week-ten days."

Ritter understood the meaning of this at once. "It ain't no time to sell cattle, Tom," he said seriously. He shook his grizzled head. "There's still enough grass here in the basin to see you through another season. With me now, it's different. Grass got a late start in the upper country, never caught no rain at all. I got to sell my steers. But you hold on. With all this forced sellin' through the country, beef will be scarce next year. Hold on like Raff Pressler and some of the others are doin'. Prices will boom next spring."

Sutton said, "That don't raise me $4,000 immediate, Wade."

"So it's that way?"

Sutton nodded. "I never did get out of debt here at the bank."

Wade Ritter's eyes sought the empty rails along the court-house side of the square. He said, "I begin to get the meaning of what happened over there. I thought it was only sheep. He's a smart man, Raff Pressler—smart like his father was before him. Both were born greedy men." His faded eyes came back to Sutton's face. "Sure, you're welcome to drive across my range. Anytime, anywhere. Tell you what, you get your stock up over the ridge and we'll throw it in with my own drive. I'm packin' grub up to the near-line camp now."

Ben Callam came into the door of his store behind, interrupting, "Was that half a case of canned tomatoes you wanted, Mr. Ritter?"

"Make it a case," Wade Ritter told him.

Ben Callam nodded to Sutton, and turned back. He was a thick-set young man with a round, smooth face and a heaviness of flesh beginning to show about his waist and collar.

"Watch Raff Pressler, Tom," Ritter continued. "Watch him when he's face to face with you because he ain't afraid. And watch him when your back is turned because he don't care how he fights. It was the same with his father; neither ever had any scruples. I remember the old Mathieu trouble."

They talked for four or five minutes more and parted, Ritter stepping back into the store. Sutton walked on past, turning to strike across street to the court-house rail where his sorrel stood. As he reached the wooden curb he heard Janice Wayne speak from her dress-goods shop next door.

"Tom," she said.

There was something about her voice that had always had its appeal for him, and still did. He turned and saw her coming out on the stoop of the shop with the clear morning sunlight striking the pale gold of her hair. She had a trim and aloof sort of beauty; and he could remember the day he had first met her, two years ago, asking her to go with him to a barbeque at T Slash T later, and the many times they had been together since. He could feel all that again.

"Tom," she said, "did you have to do it? Did you have to clash with Raff Pressler?"

He answered, "Yes. I couldn't have done anything else, Janice."

"You know he's a bad enemy. All the other cowmen will stand behind him now," she said. "Tom, I'm sorry."

He knew what she meant. Janice, with her small, determined chin was not the kind of a girl to wait forever for any man.

Janice knew too well what she wanted from life, security and a house here in town and pleasant, well-ordered things about her—not what Tom Sutton could longer hope to offer her after the pinch and trouble that had come along with the drouth. Not the ups and downs of a cowman's life; and she had understood that before he had. He watched her turn and step back into the shop, halting for a moment in the doorway, and had nothing more to say.

"Very sorry, Tom," she repeated. Good-bye."

But in that moment he realized how great was the contrast between Janice Wayne and the girl at the old Mathieu house last night with a rifle in her hands. He walked on across to the sorrel, thinking about this. The sheepman, Trent, would leave the country, he decided; nothing else for him to do. Probably he'd never see the Mathieu girl again; but as he rode out of town Tom Sutton knew a final period had been put at the end of one part of his life which had once meant a good deal to him.

TWO miles out from town Raff Pressler slowed his horse at the crest of a knoll with the Barsal boys and the rest of his crew behind him. Here the road branched, one fork continuing on toward the Flatwillow ford. The other, deep with dust and pock-marked with hoofs, veered off into the middle hills, turning and dropping again toward the lower levels of the creek where the Pressler barns and ranch house stood. Raff climbed from saddle, saying nothing to his riders who grouped themselves about him along the timber edge. There was a patience in this man as well as a headstrong temper and violence. His riders watched him covertly, shifting about and growing restless as time passed.

Half an hour elapsed before the rattle of undergear and wagon wheels became audible along the road. Soon after that the heads of a plodding team of horses, one a livery stable animal, came into view, followed by the sheepman's wagon with Sutton's bay led behind as the team topped the grade. The sheepman, Trent, reached suddenly forward on the reins and then let the leather slide out again through his hands. He stared at Pressler and the riders grouped behind him while the team came on. There was the barrel of an old shotgun protruding from the wagon under Trent's knees. As the horses came abreast Pressler, the cowman reached out and caught the near animal's rein, yanking the team to a halt.

But he did not speak immediately. The best part of a moment passed while Trent's eyes ranged the faces of the crew, finding nothing of comfort there, glanced once desperately at the shotgun under his own knees and looked back at Pressler. Pressler's head was thrust forward on his big shoulders.

"Now there's just two things you can do," Pressler said. "I'll name them for you: You can move your sheep out of the country, or you can leave them here—dead on the grass. And it don't make a lot of difference to me which you choose. Do you understand that?"

Trent swallowed. "I've got a right—" he protested, and the words choked off in his throat.

"Forget it! You have that flock on the move across Flatwillow Creek and headed out of the country before sundown," Pressler said in the same taut, unlifted voice. "Or you won't save anything. Start movin'!"

He dropped the rein he held. Trent opened his mouth and then closed it tight, and slapped at the horses. The wagon started on and disappeared over the ridge at a trot with Trent turning to stare back. Pressler spat into the dust and swung around to Dane Barsal.

"Drift more cattle up-crick, Dane. This afternoon or tomorrow," Pressler ordered. "And another thing: From now on nobody's ridin' Pressler land to cut out strays or gather stock for any brand. All that was done last roundup time. It runs flesh off our cattle. You boys ride the lines."

"Sure," Dane Barsal said, and knew exactly what his boss meant. "But how strong do we back that up in case of trouble?"

"All the way," Pressler snapped.

Dane Barsal met his brother's glance and climbed into the saddle with a motion to the crew. He led the men into the eastward fork of the road, striking a long lope through the timber.

Pressler listened to the hoof-sounds fading off, standing beside his horse with his head tilted forward. His horse fretted, anxious to follow the others; finally Pressler turned and led the animal across to a sapling pine where he tied it by the reins. He did not sit down or stir about as the moments passed. He waited motionless beside the horse, one hand resting on the saddle, with the smouldering violence and temper in him growing stronger all the while.

He was standing thus against the timber edge when Sutton climbed the knoll, hitting the road at a trot. The sorrel pricked up its ears; Sutton waited till the animal came even with Pressler. He stopped in the road.

"Waitin' for me, Raff?"

"Waitin' for you," Pressler said, and swore with a sudden huskiness. "No man can cross me the way you did in town and get away with it. Climb off that horse before I come for you and drag you out of the saddle!"

Sutton smiled thinly.

"Glad to oblige you, Raff."

Both wore guns at their hips. As Sutton came down at the edge of the road, dropping the sorrel's reins to the dust, Pressler's head settled lower and he rushed with no more pause across the short space of ground. It was no blind rush. The temper and headstrong will in him never blinded the judgment or the patience in this man.

Sutton struck and hit him hard, and was instantly borne backward with Pressler slamming through his guard. Both were tall men, both range-hard from steady weeks and months of riding. Sheer weight and the momentum of the rush carried Sutton back across the width of the road, taking punishment from Pressler's driving fists, before he could side-step and stop it with a right into Pressler's face. It brought Pressler wheeling around, swinging from the hip. They stood knee to knee and slugged, neither giving or gaining ground, and each taking his share of the battering.

This had been coming for a long while now, much longer ago than that recent incident in town. It had started years ago, building up with each new move Pressler made along Flatwillow Creek and a mutual dislike which grew stronger each time they met. They heaved and slashed at each other, very evenly matched, boots tearing up the soft ground underfoot and raising a small cloud about them.

Pressler quit and feigned and drove forward again with his head. Sutton tried to reach under it and missed, and felt the shock of that blow against Pressler's skull travel up the whole length of his arm. Neither man was trying to cover up. Pressler's left eye was puffing shut; his shirt had been ripped half off his shoulders. Sutton was tasting and spitting blood. He landed a blow that staggered Pressler. Shaking his head, Pressler charged back with a tackle that caught Sutton just above the knees. It was a battle savage as the clash of two range bulls, locking horns till one was done. Both men were breathing in hoarse, rasping gasps, trying to get enough air into lungs. They locked and strained in the dust. Sometime during this Sutton realized that Pressler was trying to reach that gun in holster at his hip.

Sutton reached the weapon first, pulled and tried to sling it out of the fight. Pressler had a doubled knee forced into the pit of his stomach; he didn't know where the gun landed. His own Colt's was tied in holster with a buckskin thong that Sutton used to keep the weapon from slipping out when he was riding. In the dirt Pressler's hand found his gun while they struggled. He twisted and tore himself half free and slugged with the weapon.

The blow hit Sutton with a blinding weight between the eyes. Somehow he caught hold of Pressler's arm with his two hands, and could only hang on desperately with everything reeled and swirled about him. Rearing back on his knees, Pressler used his other fist to batter Sutton's face. Sutton tried to get his head down against Pressler's blows and was partly successful. He would have drawn his own gun now and shot it out with Pressler gladly on any kind of even terms, but knew he didn't have that chance. He levered over on Pressler's gun arm with all the strength left in him, both half-standing now. Pressler quit slugging at his face and used both hands in an attempt to twist the gun free. Sutton rammed him with his head and shoulders.

They went down again. The gun exploded with a hot flash of muzzle flame between them. They rolled and struck with boots and fists, and the gun was somewhere lost in this. Sutton caught a grip on Pressler's throat and held on furiously while Pressler clawed and strained to throw him off. Finally he succeeded, but the interval had cleared Sutton's brain. They beat at each other on hands and knees, blood-stained and streaked with dirt, neither with much strength left. Pressler backed away and tried to get on his feet.

He stumbled over his heels and got up again while Sutton came at him. Sutton heaved a blow that struck with a dull, solid sound, rocking Pressler's head all the way back. The man stumbled over his heels and went down flat. Sutton had trouble to stand on his own weaving legs after that. He saw Raff Pressler roll half over on the ground, not entirely knocked out but making no attempt to rise. He looked around the ground for Pressler's gun and found it and slung it away into the brush.

The sorrel had run off fifty yards where the animal stood with dragging reins. He walked back with the horse. Pressler was watching him now with his head propped up. Sutton climbed into the saddle after a while, turning eastward toward the middle hills. He still had work to do.

He said between swollen lips, "Anytime you feel lucky again, Raff. Anywhere."

IV

THERE was dust along Flatwillow Creek in the middle afternoon, crawling across from the Mathieu strip toward the ford where it raised a hazy finger through the farther timber. Driven cattle would have kicked up a bunched, heavier cloud there along the road; this dust lay thin and low, spread out for a distance. Three or four miles away, following up the lower course of the creek with eleven head of cattle and three calves picked up that morning below the east drift fence, Clint Tilton watched the dust and knew its certain meaning. Clint had spent a good many years in the saddle, reading the dust and tracks and range sign, and little escaped his attention.

He did not like what he saw now, not that he had ever favored sheep, but because it meant something more. It meant that Raff Pressler had had his way. And since daylight Clint Tilton had been seeing some other things he didn't like. There was too much stock beyond the east drift fence, and it looked to Clint as if riders had put it there and maybe driven more out across the rim hills. Clint had taken it on himself to scout up through the barren canyons; and in one of the top draws he had found seven head of the cattle he now drove, along with the calves, behind a barrier built of brush and windfalls dragged across the mouth of a draw.

Clint had studied the whole set-up for some time. He didn't like it. Somebody had either left that stock in the draw to starve or intended to come back later and drive it out of the country. In this connection he thought of the Barsal brothers. Clint knew several things about the two Barsals, none creditable. Dane had once done a term in prison; and it was said Raff Pressler's father had dealed with them at the time of the old Mathieu trouble ,and all during that affair and later the Barsal brothers had rustled Long M cattle. Clint wondered if the two didn't have something of the same kind in mind again. Sometimes young men made mistakes, but there was no such redemption for either of the Barsals.

Clint had been raised in the old school which meant a rider backed the man who employed him all the way, and besides that Sutton was as good a friend as he had in the basin. He was driving the stock before him back through the heart of Pressler range, following up the creek and taking it easy because of the calves, while he kept a sharp lookout for any more of Sutton's stock. Forty or fifty cattle had been moved along the creek earlier that day. Clint saw the fresh track of this, and took his small band across a strip of open meadow, climbing up from the creek. He noticed six or eight head off in the side brush and timber then. Clint swung aside to have his look at these brands.

Five of those cattle in the brush belonged to Sutton, and this astonished Clint. It was pretty plain the stock had been cut out of that herd Pressler riders had taken

up the creek that morning or early in the afternoon. It had never before been any part of Raff Pressler's policy to allow another man's cattle to graze his home-range grass if he could help it. It had always been the other way around. By the time he got that far with his thinking, remembering what he had seen that morning beyond the drift fence, Clint began to curse softly under his breath.

He was urging the five head toward his little band on the edge of the meadow when Clint saw Dane Barsal cutting down through the timber on his left. Immediately after that he caught sight of Joe Barsal. Joe had circled the stock at the meadow edge and was coming up through the brush there. The Barsal brothers met about fifty yards ahead of Clint and came on side by side, spacing their horses a little apart. Clint carried an old single-action Colt's in the slick-worn holster at his hip.

His right hand made sure the gun was free in holster as he stopped and kept the Barsal brothers in front of him. All his life Clint had met trouble in just one way, face to face, without any intention of backing down.

"Doin' a little extra ridin', ain't you, Clint?" Dane Barsal drawled.

Joe edged his horse off to the side.

Clint nodded. "Sutton give me a job this mornin'."

"Gatherin' Sutton cattle?"

Clint said, "That's right."

He stepped his horse around to stop Joe Barsal's sidewise move, forcing Dane to turn. Whatever it was, it was serious, Clint knew by this time. He didn't expect the flat statement that came from Dane's mouth.

"No," Dane Barsal said. "Nobody's gatherin' stock across this part of the range. Strays or anything else. Round-up's past and it runs flesh off our cattle to have any rider that feels the urge cuttin' and workin' through Pressler herds. Feed's too short this year. You can explain that to Sutton. Your job's finished here."

Clint took a slow, deep breath into his lungs. There was just one way to meet trouble; otherwise a man was always licked before it started. He saw Dane's glance meet his brother's.

"Joe, you run this stock back into the brush," Dane said. "That's all there is to it, Clint."

"No," Clint Tilton said. "That's just the start. Don't make a move, Joe!"

Dane Barsal's narrow-set eyes watched Clint with a fixed and steady attention, a glowing brightness in their depths. His lank body leaned a little forward in the saddle and his jaw set; he pressed spurred bootheels against the sides of his mount. Clint knew these two were both tough and tricky in a fight; the odds were all against him. Dane Barsal said to his brother, "Go ahead. Do what I told you, Joe."

Joe Barsal turned his horse part-way around. Dane came straight on toward Clint with his horse at a walk. It wasn't more than six or eight paces. Without any hesitation Clint reached for his gun.

Dane Barsal, the nose of his horse even with Clint's animal now, drew at the same time and a lot faster with a lank savagery in him. He fired point-blank at the chest of Clint's mount as the muzzle of his gun cleared the leather. The horse reared violently and went down. Clint pushed and threw himself out of the saddle, landing on his knees. But in that fall Clint reached the gun in his holster and pulled it. He leveled the gun up from the ground.

Joe Barsal yelled something. Dane fired again, aiming at the man now, and tried to plunge his horse over him. Clint's shot hit him under the ribs like that, driving upward into Dane Barsal's body. His horse whirled. Dane's body left the saddle after four or five jumps and struck the earth like a limp sack of meal. Twisted around and, still on his horse, Joe Barsal fired from the side. Clint turned his gun on Joe.

DANE'S downward shot had clipped his arm, the left, just above the elbow. Clint paid no heed to that now. His horse was down between him and Joe Barsal. Clint fired over the horse. Joe had run off fifteen or twenty paces by that time, shooting back from the saddle. Joe reached the brush beyond and halted there while he emptied out his gun. All this raised a high roar through the timber with echoes volleyed back and forth across Flatwillow Creek. It had happened very swiftly.

For about five minutes Joe Barsal prowled the brush and timber edge, but the range was long for a six-gun; and after that he either ran out of ammunition or rode away. Clint's arm had bled a lot, soaking up his shirt sleeve, and with his teeth and one hand he knotted his neckerchief about the wound. Dane Barsal lay as he had fallen, lifeless before his body hit the earth. Whatever had happened to Joe Barsal, there wasn't going to be much time. Clint knew that, and knew exactly what he had to do. Dane's horse had run over toward the timber and stopped.

Clint ducked from one spot of cover to the next till he reached the horse. He knew definitely then that Joe had headed out after help. He still hated to leave his own saddle, because Clint knew he was never coming back into the Tonquin Basin, and that saddle suited him and had been made special. He used up another several minutes, stripping saddle from his dead horse and cinching it on Dane's mount. The strays here and the cattle Clint had been driving were scattered everywhere. It went against his principles to abandon the job like this, but every minute was counting against him now. Clint climbed on Dane's horse and ran the animal up the slope, striking a fast pace over the ridges.

He crossed the Flatwillow Creek road where it climbed up from the ford about a half hour later, noticing the solid pack of sheep track in the dust. Shortly beyond, he came into Sutton's trail and followed it upward through the pines and ran across the open top land above. He was swinging down from the saddle to open the wire gate before Clint discovered other frash track in the trail here. Clint closed the gate behind him and hugged cover till he could get a look at the cabin. He recognized Sutton's big bay work horse tied to one of the corral posts, then, and wasted no more time.

Clint had crossed the ravine and was coming around between the cabin and the corral before he noticed the girl. She was sitting quietly on the cabin steps, elbows on her knees and her dark head in her hands. She heard his horse at the same time and looked up. There was a rifle there, leaned against the steps beside her; but, most of all, Clint noticed the blue of her eyes under that smoky, dark hair. He knew there was only one place this girl could have come from.

"I thought the sheep had left here," Clint said bluntly. "I crossed track on the road."

He watched her nod. She had reached for the rifle and was holding it loosely by the barrel. "Yes, they've gone," she said. "I've brought back Mr. Sutton's horse."

Clint considered this. "Ma'am," he said, "what's comin' now won't make this no fit country for a woman. I'm sure of that. You ain't alone?"

"Suppose I am? I won't be run away from what I own," she told him. "They could shoot and stampede the sheep again like they did last night. We couldn't hire enough men to protect the flock, so the sheep had to go. But my uncle will come back later. I won't be driven from the Mathieu place like that. I intend to stay on Flatwillow Creek."

Clint had no answer for that, and time was pressing at his heels. He climbed past her up the steps and rapidly sought what he needed in the cabin. A small bag of flour, bacon, coffee and a pot, some sugar, salt—he was getting these things together, rolling them into a blanket that would tie behind his saddle, when he saw her watching him from the door.

"You'd better let me take a look at that arm," she said.

Clint stood beside the kitchen table while she cut his shirt sleeve away and bound up the bullet wound. She asked no question about it, working silently and skilfully, and Clint felt some sort of explanation was due.

"You waitin' here till Tom Sutton comes?" he asked.

She nodded soberly.

"I want to thank him for what happened this morning in town."

Clint carried his roll out and tied it behind saddle and climbed on the horse, looking back at her. The sun was still about an hour high in the sky.

"When you see Tom tell him the Barsals tried to stop me and Dane is dead, if he ain't already learned it by that time. There wasn't no other way. They come at me together," Clint explained, and rode.

V

TOM SUTTON noticed a lot of movement along the lower levels of Flatwillow Creek just before sundown. It looked to him as though a number of riders were searching the creek bottom and side hills there. He could think of no reason for this and would have liked to learn the explanation, but he had other work to do. He was bringing home about twenty head from the middle hills, including a couple of wild steers that kept trying to leave him. He wanted to get those steers behind fence before dark or he would lose them. He also had some other things to think about.

Five days, six days ago now, when he had left for Grant's Crossing, his stock had been pretty well bunched close to home, along Flatwillow Creek or the near hills. He had seen enough today to know that was no longer the case. He had more stock way down in the middle country, over Pressler's line, across into T Slash T and he didn't know where else than around his own neighborhood; and it was difficult to account for all that drift in so short a time by any ordinary means. It was going to make a much bigger job of gathering than he had expected. He had hired Clint and didn't know where to find more help. He was dog-weary from something over a day and a night spent mostly in the saddle, and stiff and bruised all over from his fight with Raff Pressler that morning.

It was just about dark when he finally shoved the cattle through a gate in the south side of his fenced field. He looked around for Clint's gather which should also be in the field, but decided dusk and shadows hid the stock somewhere. Midway across the field, though, he spotted his horses and drove them in toward the corral as he always did, to catch out a fresh mount for the morning. The horses started and shied away from the open corral gate. He saw the big bay standing there tied to a post.

He called sharply, "Clint!" and with an utter astonishment heard the girl's voice reply.

"Something has happened," she told him. "I've been waiting here to tell you. It seemed important for you to know."

He came out of the saddle, then, and met her beside the corral, unable to see much more of her face than on the old Mathieu porch last night—just the slim oval of it and her dark hair and the brushed-in shadows about her eyes. He regretted this, but memory supplied a lot more now. He listened to what she had to say without interruption, and immediately swung back on his mount and turned around after the horses. In the corral he caught out one, led the horse over to the cabin at a trot and came out with a spare saddle he kept there. He cinched on the rig for her.

"Look!" he said. "Climb straight up the hill here. Don't cross the ravine, don't try to swing over to the other trail. You'll run into a spruce thicket up-slope. When you reach the fence above ride along it to your left. You'll find a gate there beside a lopped-off pine. Give your horse his head; he knows where the gate is. He also knows the way into town."

She said, "I'm not going into town. I live at the Mathieu place—"

His voice stopped her. "Once you're through the gate, keep on the same way. Don't try to turn back to the road. Keep following the fence till you ride around it. Then line out across country for Basin Wells. This horse will get you there. Another thing!" He wheeled and crossed to the corral, and came back leading his saddled mount by the reins. "I'll be obliged if you tie this horse on the edge of that spruce thicket," he explained. "I might be needing a staked-out horse a little later."

"But—" she said.

She was sitting in the saddle now, holding his horse's reins, with the rifle he hadn't noticed before laid across the saddle-bow. "And use that gun if anybody tries to stop you!" he added, slapping her horse smartly so the animal jumped and started at a trot. The dusk that was almost night swallowed her within fifty yards, but afterward, for a minute or more, he could hear the hoofs climbing the abrupt slope back of the cabin. Then these sounds faded out.

He went back once more to the corral, opened the gate and untied the big bay she had returned. In the cabin,

Sutton struck a match and lighted the lamp on the kitchen table. He took down a .30-30 rifle from a pair of buckhorns on the wall and leaned it beside the open door. He tore open a box of shells for the rifle and dropped them loose into his jumper pocket. It was easy enough now to understand all that riding along the lower creek at sundown; that was where it must have happened. But that didn't explain this delay. He was very hungry and got out some dry jerky meat and crackers. He munched on the dry food, standing by the table. He didn't have long to wait.

A growing clatter of hoofs came off the over-ridge trail from the Flatwillow road. He heard the horsemen stop and then pound on from the gate over there. It sounded like all of Pressler's crew and a few more, about twelve or fifteen men. They saw the light of the cabin's open door and came on around the corral, swarming up into the dooryard. Sutton stepped through the light and put his back against the outside wall of the cabin. The shaft of yellow lamp glow from the doorway gave him an uncertain view of the crowd, but left these men staring against the light to find him.

There had been some loud-voiced talking coming down the trail, but now sweaty horses milled, the crowd churned about and nobody said anything for a moment. Till that moment Sutton had not been sure what his own move would be. He stood there with his hands empty and watched Raff Pressler's face, bruised and battered and one eye swollen half shut, looking back at him from the front rank of the crowd. Sutton had a positive knowledge of just how much this man hated him. It was Pressler who broke the stamping silence.

"You got Clint Tilton in there," Pressler said. "We want him. Bring him out!"

JOE BARSAL was shoving his horse through, pushing other riders aside. Farther back, Sutton caught sight of Chris Johnson, of T Slash T, with some of his men, and this told him, plainer than anything else, just how far things had gone.

"Clint Tilton was working for me," Sutton answered. "I aim to back him up."

He listened to the mutter that passed among the men, and heard Chris Johnson call over heads: "Listen, Tom! Dane Barsal's dead, and there ain't no question at all Clint killed him. I was over in the creek myself, heard the shots. We're here to take Clint into town."

"No question at all the two Barsal boys jumped him together," Sutton said. He had always liked Chris Johnson; he was sorry Johnson had mixed in this. He continued, talking to Pressler: "You'll need a warrant to come in here without a fight, now or any other time. Better go back and get Jesse Cotter."

He knew he had about three seconds to step back through the door while the crowd digested this and made up its mind to move. That was not counting on Joe Barsal. He heard Chris Johnson call, "Tom—" and the smash of Barsal's gun cut off the word. The bullet flattened past him and smacked into the far wall of the room. Sutton was inside the door, reaching toward the kitchen table. He whirled with the lamp from the table top caught up in his hand and hurled it out into the crowd massed in the dooryard while the sounds of that shot still filled the place.

He grabbed the rifle, kicking the door shut, with the high flare of the lamp exploding where it hit the ground outside and illuminating the yards bright as day for a moment. Panicky horses jumped and scattered in three directions. Several men already dismounted ran for the two corners of the cabin. Sutton sent one shot and then another whining over heads through the crack of the door and dropped the heavy bar into place. It had been this sort of a fight between him and Raff Pressler from the beginning; neither was giving or backing down an inch and the odds on Pressler's side made no difference. The issue was between the two of them; it had grown for six years now.

There were two windows in this end of the cabin with the log wall solid in the rear. Sutton knocked out a pane of glass with the rifle muzzle. Somebody started shooting down by the corral, thudding four or five shots into the door; and then a racket of raised voices interspaced with more gunfire rose off to the right. Horses had evidently been tied out of range over there and riders were moving back to

begin the assault. Several determined men within the cabin might have held off attack more or less indefinitely; two, one to protect either room of the place, could have made a strong fight of it. Alone, he was bound to lose.

He scattered a few shots against that force off to the right, targeting his sights on the small stabs of muzzle flash. The upper part of the window shattered down on him promptly and he ducked to the other, across the cabin corner. Somebody was standing right below that end window and grabbed at the barrel of his rifle when he thrust it through. He hacked at the man with the barrel and fired from here at the yonder force again, hearing the man yell and scramble away frantically as return shots began to strike the logs. Sutton crossed back and forth between the two windows for a time. But Pressler was getting things organized outside now; occasionally, Sutton could hear his heavy, lifted voice. The wild firing ceased altogether. They were going to have to come in here after him; on that point Sutton was determined.

THE broken lamp outside was burning out, flame flickering up fitfully from the kerosene-soaked ground where it had landed. Sutton was standing back in the kitchen, waiting for some target to show against the windows, when he heard glass smash and clatter in the other room. He stepped into the connecting door between the cabin's two rooms and flung lead at a man ducking down outside that window. They were at him on two sides now. A hand thrust over sill shot five times into the room, trying to find him, before it was withdrawn. He edged over, backed against the wall, and saw something stir in the outer dark and shot at it. Immediately a gun got his range and he felt the close slash of splinters from the window edge strike against his face.

A moment later half a dozen men, heaving their weight together, struck the kitchen door with an impact hard enough to knock something off a kitchen shelf. Sutton was back in the connecting doorway. He ripped a few shots into the door planks and heard the men withdraw. Somebody had thrown dirt over the guttering lamp flame or it had completely burned itself out in this interval, leaving the grounds a solid dark. Sutton jammed more shells into the rifle. He kept his head down and prowled from one room to the other, soft-footed.

Something was happening outside now, and he didn't know exactly what it was. There was a rider or two standing backed against walls of the cabin beside each window and at the corners; he could hear them move and stir, an occasional muffled word, and there was nothing he could do about it. Pretty soon the rush would come, he decided. Chris Johnson was arguing with somebody off across the yards, but he could not distinguish the words. Four or five minutes had passed by this time without a shot anywhere. Then he heard boots tramping together; a man grunted softly outside the kitchen door. Pressler gave a sudden shout.

Fire cut loose through the other room's window. A man climbed up there, scraping the logs with his boots, and emptied out his gun inside. Sutton shot once and missed, running toward him, and swung down with the rifle. The man toppled back and fell, dropping his six-gun on the floor under Sutton's boots. A shotgun exploded deafeningly over the window sill. From the kitchen came a rending crash as the butt of a log carried up from the corral splintered through the door. All this was happening at once. Sutton wheeled and managed to reach the connecting door before men flooded in.

He shot through into the kitchen, holding the rifle hip-high and jacking shells into it as fast as he could work his arm. It was impossible to see anything much in the black of the room except the tongues of guns. He dragged the door shut and let the rifle fall, and went for his six-gun with fire crossing from the window at his back. A man was down in the kitchen, groaning dismally through the racket. The whole place reeked of gunsmoke. But they had had to come in after him as Sutton had promised himself. He found the rungs of the ladder leading to the attic overhead and climbed them with the six-gun in one hand. He butted the trap-door above and pushed it open with his head and crawled out on the puncheon flooring there.

There was a cot up here and an accu-

mulation of odds and ends. He pulled the cot over the trap-door for what weight it would give. There was just one way out and that was the window at one end of the low, slant-roofed attic. An uproar of sound, voices, shouts and tramping boots, now filled the two rooms below. Sutton reached the attic window, some ten or twelve feet above ground on the ravine side of the cabin. He climbed through it and leaped. He hit the earth within a yard of some man running around toward the cabin's door. He swung once with the Colt's in his hand; the man skidded into him and dropped.

He ran on into the ravine, knowing every foot and yard of this ground. Water splashed under his boots; he turned, ducking through the willow scrub and undergrowth, following up the steep ravine while the hue and cry set up behind him at the cabin. He heard Pressler's shout again and climbed on, breathing heavily. The ravine sides became rocky. He quit the rocks, cutting across the open slope, and now heard riders leave the yards below and start a running search after him. He made another fifty yards and dropped flat to the ground while the shadow of a rider whipped past him. He changed his course again and this time made the near edge of the timber above, beginning a search of his own after his horse here.

He zigzagged through the spruce, unable to see much of anything, hoping to blunder into the animal before somebody else did. The rider who had passed him came slashing back through the thickets. He heard a long yell off on the other hand; the man pounded off that way. He stopped and listened, trying to hear the animal stir somewhere and locate it that way. What he heard about a minute later was Laura Mathieu calling his name softly:

"Sutton! Tom!" She was working along through the timber, stopping every few yards to listen as he did. "Sutton!"

VI

HE climbed into the saddle, not saying anything, and led the way up through the spruce, halting for long intervals in the thickets. She had disobeyed his orders, but without her help there wouldn't have been any horse waiting for him up here in the first place. There were riders in the Pressler crew just as smart as he was in the brush, and Sutton didn't let that fact out of his mind for a minute. So much time had passed that he dared not use that gate he had told her about by the lopped-off pine; others knew about that gate. He had a hunch somebody was waiting there right now, standing close and motionless under the pine with a gun raised on the trail.

He kicked the staples out of a post near the far fence corner, jamming his boot against the wire, and held the barbed strands down while she led the horses across. In the saddle again, Sutton took off across the ridges, the windings of Flatwillow Creek dark and unfathomable on their right, and her horse beside his. There was the thin horn of a new moon just dropping over the Warbonnet Peaks; and he struck straight for the craggy ridges and wild, deep-timbered draws of that mountain country. The stirrups of the saddle were long for her. He noticed that from the way she rode, and finally stopped to shorten the leathers.

"This isn't the way into Basin Wells," she said.

He finished with the off stirrup and walked around her horse. "Too late for that," he told her. His voice sounded flat. "There'll be riders blocking every trail that way right now, only asking for a chance to shoot. Tomorrow, daylight, those same riders will study out the tracks and follow them. I'm going to see that you get out of the country. All the way, before I go back." He started on.

She held her mount. She said, "I live on Flatwillow Creek. The Mathieu place belongs to me."

"Look!" He stopped again and turned around in the saddle. "I don't know why you waited for me up in the timber, but after that it was already too late. Dane Barsal's dead. At least one other man went down in the cabin tonight. I own that cabin and they have no right in it against my will. They thought Clint Tilton was inside and if he had been Clint would never have lived to walk outside the door. I've run cattle in the basin for six years; I own two and a quarter sections of land about the cabin—and the bank hasn't got it yet. But I can't go

back now to that cabin and live there.

"Eight-ten Pressler riders and some others are going to make certain I don't." He shook his head in the darkness, speaking very earnestly. "The old Mathieu trouble was fought in another day. But neither of us will ever go back to the Tonquin Basin to live like other folks unless Raff Pressler is thoroughly beaten so he has no power left. That's the only way it ever will be settled for us. Haven't you seen enough by this time to understand that?"

He swung his horse on abruptly, and heard her following after a moment. Presently she spoke again at his side. "Yes," she said, "I've always understood that. Till now I wasn't sure you did."

She kept the pace beside him, following the increasingly rugged up-and-down pitch of this land. Mostly it was up through side draws and ravines clogged with brush and timber. About midnight they paused, and Sutton left the horses with her while he moved on afoot. She could see the dim edge of a clearing and, after what seemed a long time, the flare of a match outlining the window square of some shack. He came back with a sack in one hand and tied this on his saddle.

"Upper range camp," he explained. "All the outfits use it. Couldn't find much grub."

Sutton skirted the clearing with the horses. She lost all track of time, but now occasionally could look far out into dim starlit space and knew they were climbing high on the mountainside, working around to the north and west all the time. There were long reaches of forest with the pine-needle mat springy and almost soundless under hooves, and then abrupt, rocky draws where the animals slid and clattered and often Sutton had to search out a way to cross afoot. She sensed that he was angling for some particular spot with a certain knowledge of this country.

They dropped into one of the steep, eroded canyonheads in the end, and Sutton led straight down it with the crags and jutting ledges rising high on either hand. There was shallow water in the bottom. Without any warning a little space of meadow opened out and the hungry horses reached and tried to grab for the grass while they crossed. At the edge Sutton dismounted and began taking off the saddles. He staked the horses in the meadow and then built a little fire back in a cleft of the rocks. Dawn was beginning to creep up now from the east.

He took flour and a dutch oven from the sack and baked bisquits in the ash of the fire while coffee simmered in a smoke-blackened pot. This was the meal. Afterwards at sunup with the fire drenched so no smoke would show, she moved into the mouth of the meadow and found half the world spread out before her view. The basin with its rolling, timbered hills lay south and east, a vast encircled cup in the land. Below stood the north ridge with the dry, broken country behind it where Wade Ritter ran his big outfit extending off toward Grant's Crossing. She wondered if she could see the Crossing and Sutton, following her, pointed out a tiny drift of smoke haze on the horizon.

"Best get some sleep," he told her, when they came back. He had had the sweat-damp saddle blankets drying out and handed them to her. "We'll be riding again when it grows dark."

SHE used one of the saddles for a pillow, the blankets under her, and never knew what happened to him. But along in the early afternoon she found him, back braced against a boulder in the shade, looking out across that far sweep of lower land. He didn't speak as she sat down beside him, and she knew that something deeply troubled him. At length she saw what seemed to be dust stirring along the north ridge below, a long way off, and mentioned this.

"Uh-huh. Too many riders on that ridge; it's been that way since morning," he muttered. She wondered if he had slept at all. He said he had and nodded toward the ridge again, adding, "I don't like it."

"What will you do? Later, I mean; after you've got rid of me."

He turned and looked at her searchingly for a long moment. From the first she had sensed an abrupt and plain honesty about this man, and it was that way now. "I don't want to get rid of you," he said. "I want to keep you with me like this. I'd like to make it last a week, a month—and I'd be happy on bisquits and coffee, just

to see you look back at me across a campfire or standing out there in the mouth of the meadow with the morning in your face. Instead, I'm going to get you out to Grant's Crossing as soon as that's possible."

His reply held her silent for a time. She said finally, "I mean after that."

"I've got to gather two hundred head of cattle and sell them for enough to keep the Basin Wells bank from cleaning me out," he explained. "That was decided two days ago when I started back from the Crossing, after Workman had turned me down on a loan. Sam Workman wouldn't gamble $4,000 against the two and a quarter sections of land I own and the cattle to boot on a year's time, so I could pay off the bank. You can see what he thinks of my chances."

"Workman. Sam Workman," she said. "A little, dried-up, saddle-leather sort of man with eyes that never miss a thing, whether its the callouses on a ranchman's hands or the broken windmill in his yard which should have been fixed. Workman made a fortune in Oregon cattle in the boom years, and put it back in stock and land. He holds the purse strings on a dozen outfits, mostly to the north. But did you know Sam Workman backed my father on Flatwillow Creek those years ago?"

He shook his head. "I know," he said, "that Sam Workman has a thorough knowledge of the country and Raff Pressler. That's the reason he turned me down."

They left the high pocket meadow at dusk, but something was wrong. Laura Mathieu could tell that from the set of Sutton's shoulders, dark-framed against the starlight ahead, and the way he rode. He was dropping off the mountainside, striking for that long divide ridge below, and something had seriously changed his plans, although he spoke no word of this to her. Two or three hours later he left her and was gone for a long while. He returned and abruptly circled off the other way, moving very slowly through the brush. She was sure she smelled the smoke of a campfire now, and after that a horse whinnied distantly once in the night.

He halted presently. "Something's happened here," he told her. "I'm not quite sure what it is."

He evidently intended to find out if he could. Again he was gone, this time afoot, and the wait was longer than before. They moved along the ridge after that; but it was getting on toward dawn before he finally gave it up and left, lining out across that other dry, broken country to the north where Wade Ritter ran his cattle, traveling now at a fast, steady pace. It was growing light in the east and he was trying to make up some of that time lost in the night.

"I'm going to leave you at Ritter's ranch," he told her. "You can stay there till Wade makes a trip out to the Crossing and go along. Then get in touch with your uncle."

They were following a beaten trail with the first color of sunrise streaking up from the east when he saw the horse. The animal showed the mark of hard and desperate riding; old sweat and dust were caked all over it and the horse had fallen somewhere, laming one foreleg badly. One rein was broken off at the bit, the other dragged. There was a roll tied on behind the saddle cantle. Somewhere Laura Mathieu knew she had seen that blanket roll before; she vaguely recognized the horse.

"That—it's the horse Clint Tilton was riding!" she exclaimed.

He made no reply. He climbed down and walked around the lame, weary animal, studying everything about it; and then took the saddle and bridle off and let the horse go free with a kind of suppressed fury in every move he made. It was Clint's saddle. He rode on with her, stiff, the line of his mouth clamped tight, for about another hour, reaching the edge of a flat valley.

"Yonder." He pointed down the valley where in the distance stood ranch buildings and a clump of cottonwoods. "Explain to Wade Ritter the way it's been," he said. "You can depend on him. I'm in a hurry to get back now."

VII

IT took him six hours to back-trail the wanderings of that horse, not that the distance was long, but because he had to untangle the trail from a lot of other track and much of the way was through brush

and over rocks. But in the end he found what he had known would mark the end of that trail; and he buried Clint Tilton's body there on the ridge as best he could with no implements, except a pocket knife, to dig at the bare ground, piling a mound of boulders over the spot later. Clint had ridden some distance after the shot that had at last pulled him, weak and dying, from the saddle was fired. That explained all the riding and all the dust here yesterday. They hadn't been sure about the job immediately.

Sutton headed down into the basin and he was stalking in among Pressler's ranch buildings about midnight before he realized that move was no good. He couldn't bushwhack Raff Pressler, shooting from the night or lying in wait for him till dawn. He simply wasn't made that way; and to buck Raff Pressler in his own ranch yards with a crew of riders taking pot-shots from the sides meant a certain and complete victory for Pressler, the easiest possible way. Sutton got control of himself, figuring these things out with a lighted window showing its bright square from the house in front of him, and left the same way he had come. He had to beat Raff Pressler on the ground, on the range, and wait for his meeting with the man, gun against gun.

Before daylight Sutton had run his horses from the fenced field and was moving them into one of the Flatwillow canyons. He had found the interior of his cabin wrecked, shelves pulled down, the stove turned over and furniture splintered by the mob that had fought its way in and then lost him. But from the litter in the kitchen he salvaged a skillet and the makings of a few poor meals. He caught a couple of hours sleep in the brush that morning, and climbed on a fresh horse. He drifted back toward his own place and from the timber located two small bands of cattle wearing his brand. That night he drove the stock across Flatwillow Creek and down to the east. He was over in the middle country, cutting across Pressler's range, by another sunup.

He slept again, well-hidden and so utterly weary he did not waken till afternoon. But everything was quiet. Several riders passed about a half-mile away later, jogging across toward Basin Wells with nothing else particular in mind, it seemed; and he started gathering cattle after that. He drove twenty-eight head across Pressler land that night with the young moon of some help now. He picked up last night's drive, a few missing, at daylight, and started up this east end of the ridge with the herd, trying to keep dust hidden in the timber and deep side ravines. There were two men at Wade Ritter's boundary camp on the high ridge above. They were holding about a hundred head of Wade's own gathered steers on a strip of fenced meadow.

"Yeah. Wade packed us in some grub four-five days ago," Tully Ramsden, the elder, told Sutton. "He said you'd be drivin' up some stock which we was to hold with our own. But I thought Clint Tilton was helpin' you?"

Sutton said bluntly, "Clint's dead."

"Clint?" Ramsden shook his head. "I hadn't heard. We been mighty busy, working over to the east mostly. How did it happen?"

But the other man had whirled about. He was a good deal younger than Ramsden, about twenty-two, with a hard, bony face and reckless eyes the color of stone. His name was Charlie Spears. Sutton had met him once or twice before. Spears jerked a thumb toward the higher Warbonnet end of the ridge.

"Over that way," he said. "Yesterday I seen the tracks, blowed over pretty well by this time. But I told you last night, Tully, there'd been a manhunt in there."

Sutton looked away, standing stiff. "That's the spot and the way it happened," he agreed.

"But Clint—Clint was a stubborn man. But he never did a mean thing in his life," Ramsden protested.

"That's right too," Sutton said. "The trouble was he was working for me."

He ate a noon meal with these two men, fresh beef and beans and potatoes and oven bread. Ritter had four or five two-man camps like this scattered out across his wide range, and he saw to it that his riders were well-supplied. When the meal was finished Spears helped himself to the stores and cut the loin from a quarter of beef, stowing the provisions in a sack while Ramsden watched him silently. Both rode out to help Sutton put the forty-some

head he had driven up the ridge into the meadow field. When they came back Spears tied the grub sack on his saddle.

Ramsden began to shake his head. "Wade ain't a-goin' to like it, Charlie," he muttered. "He keeps his stock on this side of the ridge and rides his boundary lines, and don't want no trouble in the basin. You know that as well as me, Charlie."

Sutton said, "That's right."

Spears climbed back on his horse. "Tell Wade I quit," he answered. He looked at Sutton with his stone-colored, reckless eyes. "You need a man to take Clint's place, don't you?"

"Never more so."

Spears touched spurs to his mount. "Let's go. Clint helped me out of a jam once," he added. "Couple of years ago."

TWO nights later they took sixty head over the ridge by moonlight without much trouble, but next daylight from the hills it looked as though a hornet's nest had been stirred up in the basin. Pressler had most evidently tracked out some sign and discovered what was happening by this time. They angled down into the Flatwillow canyons and got fresh horses under saddle, and lined across toward T Slash T. They had worked out a system now. Spears rode the open flats and cut through the cattle he found, looking for Sutton's brand, and when he picked up a few head drove them into the brush or timber where Sutton waited and kept moving along.

This late morning Spears ran into Chris Johnson. Johnson had three riders with him, and Sutton saw them arguing and came down from the timber.

"What I'm after, Chris, is my own stock," Sutton put it up to Johnson. "And nothing else. You've got no right to stop me. Or does T Slash T take its orders now from Raff Pressler?"

"Jesse Cotter is looking for you," Johnson said, not answering the question.

"Does that make any difference?"

"No." Johnson squared himself in the saddle. Once they had been friends. "Get your stock and take it off my range. We've been shoving all the drift back this way. You'll find ten-twelve head over in the next valley. My riders won't bother you."

They took an even thirty head east of the far drift fence that evening, and in this rough section of the rim hills found much more stock than Sutton had expected, as Clint Tilton had once discovered. They split up next day, Spears returning to work through T Slash T again. Sutton had crossed the stage road from Basin Wells which cut through here on its way to Shelfrock Springs and Forty Mile Corral, out beyond, where it joined the easterly stage route from Grant's Crossing. He was bringing cattle across, following the road for a distance, when a rig and team appeared through the dust and he recognized Ben Callam and the girl beside him.

"Tom!" Ben Callam called, and Sutton reined his horse up beside the buggy, lifting his hat. Janice was sitting close beside the solid storekeeper. "Tom, want you to be one of the first to congratulate us," Callam said. "Janice and I were married this morning. We're driving out to the Crossing for a honeymoon."

Janice's eyes were lowered behind the thin veil she wore. But Sutton's smile was genuine. "I wish you every happiness. Both of you," he said, and meant it thoroughly.

Once this girl had meant a lot to him. But after she and Ben Callam had driven on along the road, he had difficulty recalling her blonde prettiness because the face of another girl with blue cloudy eyes and smoke-dark hair was so often in his mind now. Janice had what she wanted; Ben Callam did a good steady trade in his store which meant the kind of a life she desired. It wasn't like the cow business, up one year and down the next, drouth and dust and running stock after dark—a man's own brand at that—to get it out of the country and pay a debt.

He brought in nineteen head in that day's gather, and at sundown met Charlie Spears who had eleven more and some other news.

"We've cleaned up around the edges," Spears told him. "And that's about as far as we go without walkin' into a loaded gun-fight. Pressler's got seventy-eighty head of your cattle on Flatwillow Creek. The stock's mixed in with about a hundred head of his own for a blind. But it ain't no happen-chance. He's waitin' for you to come after them cattle."

"First we'll move what we've got here," Sutton said. "Pressler might make a good guess where we are now."

They ate a hurried meal and moved out to the east with better than half a hundred cattle in this herd, driving up around the far east end of the ridge next day to where Ramsden still held down the line camp alone. With these, Sutton had a hundred sixty-some head in the meadow field. Ramsden had not seen Wade Ritter, but he had news from another rider that Ritter had made a trip out to the Crossing and was going to drive his steers within the next two days. Nothing about Laura Mathieu.

"Not much time if you want to tail in on Wade's drive," Spears commented. "We're still around forty head short."

"But we know where to get 'em," Sutton said.

Spears looked at him with his reckless, stony eyes. "Tonight maybe?"

"Tonight," Sutton said. He turned to Tully Ramsden. "Got a dry cowhide around somewhere?"

They came off the ridge at dusk with a high, filmy layer of clouds over the sky. The moon was a half-round disk that shed a pale, almost imperceptible light through this when dark night settled down and later the clouds thickened. Along the creek, Spears sighted the small blaze of a campfire and worked in close, reporting five men there at the camp. The cattle were spread out across the bottoms. Sutton unrolled the stiff cowhide Ramsden had given him and tied his rope to it. There was no use delaying. He started his horse at a run toward that loosely bunched herd on the bottom grass with the cowhide pitching and slamming the ground with a dry, unearthly racket, scratching and rattling and sailing into the air behind him. He hadn't made a hundred yards before every animal in the herd was running.

Spears quartered across toward the camp. Gunshots began to lace the night from over on that hand and Spears stampeded two saddled night horses from the edge of the camp, running almost into it. Riders followed in the rear, adding to the tumult; and Sutton thought of the sheep raid in which these men had played their part. He cast off the rope and cowhide. Within a mile he began to throw his horse against lead cattle, trying to split a wedge in the herd; and finally turned forty or fifty head off to the left into the brush and timber, and knew Charlie Spears was doing the same thing somewhere. They had had the advantage of attack. Against the steep edge draws the cattle ahead stopped and Sutton settled down to work, driving as silently as he could. He knew he would be lucky if half this stock belonged to him and there was no way to tell one cow from another in the black night. He kept shoving the animals up-ridge.

Just after daylight he sighted Spears. They brought their cattle together and cut out Pressler stock, giving it a run off the high ridge. Spears had an ugly gash across one cheek where he had run into a limb in the dark. He was covered over solidly with dust.

"Forty-six head, I make it," Spears said. "That ain't bad." It was only about a mile to the camp Ramsden held.

Sutton looked long at him. "You're a mighty good man at this sort of a job, Spears. If it ain't too personal a question, what was that trouble Clint helped you out of a couple years back?"

"You know what it was," Spears answered. "I'd have gone to jail for cow-theft, except for Clint. But I've played it straight ever since."

"I know that too," Sutton told him. "You're in charge of my stock when Wade Ritter drives to the Crossing. When you sell take out your wages and send the rest in a money-order in my name to the Basin Wells bank." He turned away. "I've got some other business to tend to now. Good luck."

VIII

SHERIFF JESSE COTTER had journeyed eastward from Basin Wells the preceding evening, dropping off the late stage at the Shelfrock Springs stop. The sheriff made a few discreet inquiries here and eventually got the information he sought from a hostler at the stage corrals. Jesse Cotter hired himself a mount, and a couple of hours thereafter rode into one of the struggling dry-land outfits among the farther gulches. The owner of the outfit, a shambling, big-boned man,

met him in the yards with a lantern and heard Jesse Cotter's question.

"Sure, he's workin' for me. You'll find him in the bunk shack yonder, where you see the window light." The rancher looked up at the sky overhead. "Heavens above, ain't it never goin' to rain?"

Cotter walked into the bunk shack and found a stocky, sorrel-headed rider named Harvey Riggs seated on the edge of a bunk, pulling off his boots. The look in Riggs' eyes grew sullen and wary, but not afraid. Sheriff Cotter asked the other two men in the room to step out for a few minutes. He stood with his back against a table that held the lamp, and looked down at the bunk where Riggs sat.

"You left the basin sort of sudden-like, didn't you, Harvey?" Cotter asked.

"Any law against it?" Riggs snapped. "You got no reason to follow me, if that's it."

"I thought you might have something to say, Harvey. That's the only reason."

Riggs thought about this for a while, studying his stockinged feet and his boots on the floor. "All right," he said. "I've got this to say: I ain't a squeamish man; I've worked for some pretty tough outfits and seen a lot of things. But I know the two Barsal brothers were together that afternoon they met up with Clint Tilton and both were set for trouble. I heard the orders Pressler give all of us. If Clint had been in Sutton's cabin that night later and surrendered he'd have been shot before he stepped over the doorsill. Not that it was much different the way it happened—a dozen of us scourin' out the ridge brush for him. His horse had fell and was too lame to run. He never had a chance. It was Joe Barsal hit him with a long shot, and Clint's dead somewhere on that ridge. After that I quit. I got that much pride left."

Sheriff Cotter listened in silence. He said finally, "That's about what I thought you might have to tell me, Harvey. If I need you to testify later, I'll send for you. Thanks."

He rode back to Shelfrock Springs and spent the night at the stage station, and at half-past seven in the morning boarded the return stage for Basin Wells which had left Forty Mile Corral at daybreak and stopped for breakfast here. High clouds still covered the sky this morning. Cotter had had his own breakfast earlier, and so did not come in contact with the other passengers till he climbed into the stage and recognized Sam Workman and the girl already seated across from him. He shook hands cordially with Workman and raised his hat to Laura Mathieu.

"Thought you'd quit the country with your uncle, ma'am," the sheriff said, getting himself settled in his seat. "But I'm not surprised to see you coming back."

She did not explain how she had left the basin and reached Grant's Crossing; but told him, "My uncle has found graze for his sheep this side of Forty Mile Corral, if the water holds out. Next year he'll be moving back to his own range, farther east."

"A better country out there for sheep," Sheriff Cotter remarked.

TOM SUTTON reached the street at Basin Wells around the middle of the morning and left his gaunt-flanked horse standing at the hitch rail by the court house water trough. He stood there, leaned against the rail, for a time—long enough for the town to take its look at him and figure out what this meant. There had already been a rumor that cattle held under guard by Pressler had been stampeded last evening along Flat-willow Creek. That lower end of the range was Pressler's undisputed property. Pressler had made a stand against Sutton's working his range after stock; and no rider aware of what was happening was ignorant of the fact that Sutton cattle had been among those on the creek. The town and every stray rider in it knew Sutton had run that stock.

He had deliberately stepped into Pressler's trap and taken the bait and got away before the jaws could be sprung. It was known he had a gathered herd up on the edge of Wade Ritter's country, waiting Ritter's drive to Grant's Crossing. He had beat Raff Pressler on the range. And now he was in town, laying down a challenge of his own that was just as plain as his presence here. The whole town knew what it meant.

From doorways and windows and the court house square, the town watched him walk on along the street. He put his

head in through the doors of the bank for a moment. He turned and crossed to Krammer's Hardware Store, and when he came out threw an empty .45 cartridge box into the gutter. Two riders had swung hurriedly to horse in front of Cal Darro's Saloon in the interval; instead of following the main street, the two cut around behind the old frame hotel and hit a high lope out of town along the alley there. Sutton watched this from the walk in front of the hardware store and moved across to Darro's place which stood next door to the hotel. He hit the saloon's swinging doors with his shoulders and passed through.

Darro was standing behind the bar. He leaned over, and spoke into the ear of one of his customers: "See if you can find Jesse Cotter. Right away."

"Cotter left town yesterday. On the late stage," the other replied.

Sutton took a single drink. He lingered there, elbows backed against the rail of the bar, while Darro pretended to busy himself stacking glasses and the few men in the saloon congregated at the rear of the place. There was no talk at all. Presently Sutton walked out into the street again.

He was not conscious of the run of time. He was waiting for a single thing to happen with his mind intent upon it to the exclusion of all else. The by-play was no part of this. Chris Johnson, coming along walk from the hotel, stopped and with some hesitation said, "Tom, sheep started this and the sheep are gone. But T Slash T is sending in a new foreman to replace me; I should have expected that in any event. I'd like to shake your hand before I leave. We used to be friends."

Sutton said, "Then we'll part friends, Chris."

He watched the street. Over among the edge hills east a crawling thread of dust which meant the morning stage, coming in along the main road yonder, briefly caught and held his attention. The timber of the hills looked almost black under the gray, solid sky and no breeze dispersed the dust. Something else caught his eye. A boil of other dust came over the near hill on the Flatwillow road and halted, just showing above the pines, and gradually settled to earth. Riders had left the road there, Sutton knew, and circled around through the timber to approach the town. He waited where he stood.

There was a stir of movement over on the far side of the court-house square a little later. A man ran through the court house and spoke to others on the steps. Four or five minutes elapsed before he saw Raff Pressler. Pressler came in sight, now, around the far corner of the court house, and a warning strong as the beat of a bell began to hammer in Sutton's brain. Too much time had passed. Somebody else was over behind that wall of buildings directly across the street, coming at him from that quarter. He heard the noise of hoofs, the rattle and clatter of the stage swinging into the other end of town, above the hotel.

Pressler had reached the wooden walk planks in front of the court house. He passed the water trough and came ahead with his big shoulders slightly stooped and his arm hanging loose, bent a little at the elbows. Still about a hundred yards separated them. Sutton stepped up on the opposite curb and put the wall of a building next door to the hardware store at his back. The move stopped Pressler for about ten seconds; then he ducked under a hitch rail and walked out into the center dust of the street. It was a curious thing for him to do; Sutton knew exactly what was going to happen now. Pressler was getting himself out of the line of that other man's cross-fire. He came on down the middle of the street.

The other man was going to step from the row of buildings at his back and shoot from the left, Sutton knew, while Pressler opened the gun-fight in the street. Pressler's two hands had lifted a little higher, held stiff now, the right directly over his gun holster. Sutton heard the coming stage swing over in the street and come to a jolting halt in front of the hotel. The driver on the stage-box kicked the mail sack from underfoot, and called down to his passengers, "All out!" and suddenly became rigid. His hands took a new, firm grip on the reins, and he made no other move.

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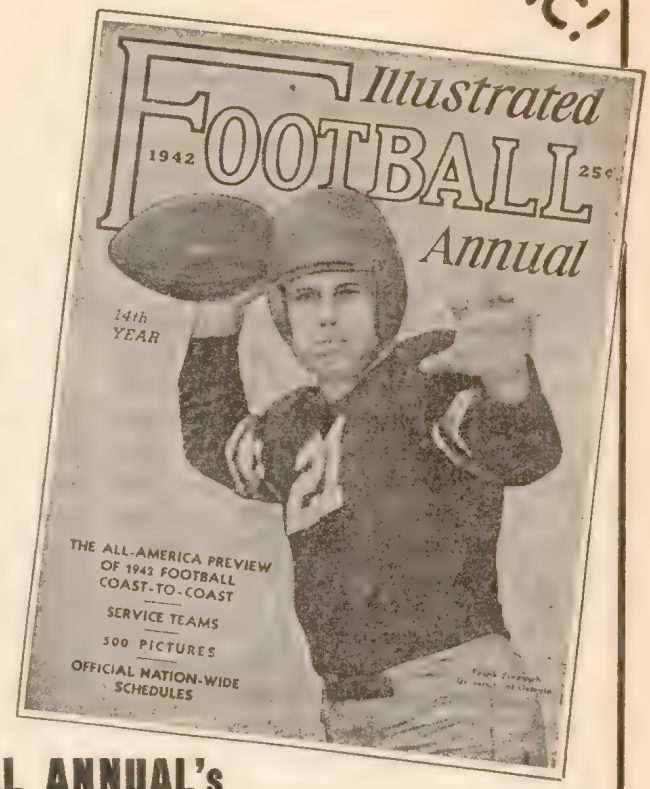

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JESSE COTTER was the first man out of the stage. He stopped and helped the girl down, and had taken a couple of steps across walk toward the hotel before he realized something was wrong. He turned and saw Raff Pressler in the middle of the street beyond. Sheriff Cotter started forward and between the lead and wheel spans of the stage team had his slantwise glance at Sutton on the opposite walk. Cotter reached for the gun he carried in a shoulder holster. He was forward far enough now to see Joe Barsal stepping from the space between the buildings, rifle in hand.

This was a flash of movement Sutton saw only from the corners of his eyes. He was waiting and ready for it and in that split-second drew, throwing himself hard against the wall at his back and whirling part-way around to fire. The smash of Barsal's Winchester entirely drowned out Cotter's warning yell. Barsal jacked another shell into barrel. In that space of time Sutton fired twice, and now Pressler's gun was blasting from the middle of the street. Sutton's second shot hit Barsal and started him staggering back against the building corner. Barsal struck the corner and reeled out on the walk in a sort of headlong spin, dropping the Winchester. Sutton had thrown his gun around toward Pressler.

Pressler stood on wide-spread legs in the street, firing his third shot of the battle fast as a gun-hammer could be thumbed. That shot caught Sutton as he turned. It hit him with a visible impact that leaned him against the wall at his back and set him pushing at the boards with the flat of his left hand. Cotter, in that instant, thought he was going down. It was only an instant. Pressler raised his gun and aimed it now along his arm, and Sutton fired just then. The noise of all this made a solid roar that slammed against building fronts without any break or pause and filled the town. Pressler jerked and bent over. He fired again and then again, and both these shots were wild. He was coming at Sutton, angling across the side dust of the street, at a lumbering, lurching run, the old hate and fury in him holding him up.

Pressler came against the low wooden curb and stumbled, unable now to lift his boot over that ten-inch barrier, and sprawled forward on his hands and knees. Not more than a few yards separated them, Sutton backed against the wall with the flat of one hand braced against it. Some sort of an end like this had been coming for a long while; it had been a certainty sooner or later after that fight between the two alone on the Flat-willow road, unless Sutton quit the country. Pressler tried to raise his gun; there was still one shot left in it. Sutton did not fire again. Pressler's big head dropped, and like that the life went out of him.

Down on the walk at the building corner behind, Joe Barsal crawled and tried to reach his fallen rifle. Jesse Cotter had just now crossed the street and kicked the Winchester aside. Sutton saw this movement in a kind of blur, braced against the wall. He shook his head, recognizing the girl who had followed Cotter and was streaking toward him, but thinking he was imagining things. Then she was right beside him with her arms helping hold him up.

"Tom! Tom—you're hurt! You—"

He let the gun drop from his hand. "It's not so bad, I think. . . ."

PRESSLER'S angling bullet had hit his side like the blow of a hammer, been deflected by two ribs and gone out under his left arm, leaving a cracked rib and not much more damage. They sat in the front corner room of the hotel next day, Sutton with his side tightly strapped and bandaged. So long as he was careful, he could move and walk about today. But Sam Workman was doing the walking, pacing back and forth between the two windows, and most of the talking. There was a steady rain falling from the leaden sky outside.

"All right," Sam Workman said. "So you come to me at the Crossing and wanted money to pay off your loan here at the bank and I turned you down. So what? Don't you see the way this plan works out makes everything different? Combine what you've got and take in the old Mathieu place up to Wade Ritter's boundary line. String a strip of wire across down-creek, to keep your own stock in and the other man's out. Mow the

Mathieu meadow bottoms and put up hay each year. That range would support two thousand head, the good years and the bad, managed right. That's what I come in here to talk to you about."

Sutton watched Laura Mathieu. He said, "Your idea?" He noticed the small flush of color that ran up into her cheeks, and it pleased him.

"Sure, it was her idea," Workman growled, continuing his pacing. "I backed her father on the Mathieu place. If he'd had what you've got on the other side of the creek as well as his own ground, things might have turned out different. The two places make what neither has alone. She had sense enough to see it and put it up to me."

"Not a bad idea," Sutton said, and watched that flush in her cheeks deepen. "A sort of partnership."

Workman threw up his hands. "Now listen! I got no time for stuff like that, save it. With this rainfall cows will be up five dollars a head before I can get back to the Crossing. In a month it'll be ten-fifteen dollars; the drouth's broke. I got to make that stage. Now's the time to buy and not a minute to waste. I put up the money. Seven hundred head of grade white-faces for a start. You come out to the Crossing, Sutton, and sign the papers and bring 'em back just as soon as you can make it. Understand?"

Laura Mathieu said, "No, a thousand head, Mr. Workman. Now's the time to buy."

Workman glared at her. "All right, all right." He started for the door, and turned and grinned. "And let her be the business manager when you get married, Sutton."

The door slammed. Sutton got up painfully and walked across to where she sat. He looked down at the top of her dark head, and said musingly, "The best idea yet!"

She turned up her face. "Tom, if you think—"

He stopped those words with his lips. "I think you've come back to Flatwillow Creek to stay," he told her presently. "For a good, long while. With me. And don't try to back out of it now. You're in too deep for that."

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LONGHORN GREED

By JAY J. KALEZ

A strange friendship had linked Steve Jensen and Lem McCabe. But hunger for herds can break a mighty bond—and sun-up was the hour for death.

"DRAW an' blaze, damn yuh. Start 'em smokin'. I ain't claimin' no favors."

Steve Jensen snarled his words through twisted lips. His slicker-clad body half crouched in his sudden flush of rage. A pace away, Lem MacCabe, top hand to the Box-7, halted dead in his tracks, the fingers of one hand flipping back his rain-soaked mackinaw and gripping the handle of his six-gun. With narrowed eyes and set jaws, he stood poised.

Steve was covered. His long slicker, dripping and stiff with the icy sleet that whipped about the loading corrals of Weeaph Junction, covered his hip-slung guns completely. Lem had the drop on him, and the advantage of surprise. Steve had never even considered the possibility of the Box-7 outfit loading out a herd of stall-fattened young stuff for the late winter market as his own outfit was doing. As foreman of the Tangled-V he had been too busy with his duties to inquire as to the meaning of the extra dozen cattle cars spotted at Weeaph Junction.

"It ain't favor yuh're gettin', Steve," the cold voice of the mackinaw-clad puncher drawled. "Reckon anyone'd kick a skunk out from under his feet 'fore he drilled it. I'm jest aimin' to keep my word to Pop Gallagher . . . that's all's holdin' my lead. I keeps an agreement when I makes one."

Steve's body stiffened with the slur. His one hand was still poised at the snap of his slicker, ready to rip it open and make one dive for the six-gun beneath, though that would be his last move. Hate burned in Steve's eyes. Hate that reflected itself in the squinted eyes of the man opposite. Hate that was known and respected by every range-hand and drifter that meandered the Belle Fouche basin.

Hate of the bitterest kind.

A year before Steve and Lem had been friends . . . the kind of friends that even the sentiment-hardened men of the open range recognized and respected. The kind of friends that admitted no fault of one another, that recognized no taunt of battle as for one without being for the other. Steve and Lem had been partners.

Together they had drifted on to the Belle Fouche range from the south. Together they had established their worth as cowmen as they battled through their first Wyoming winter. Together they had won the friendship of ranchmen and cowboys alike.

Then had come a hunger for herds.

Some wiser heads had read the sign. Some well-meaning ones had offered advice. Some fools had even allowed their tongues to waggle a bit freely. All had tasted the temper of the two cowpokes in their turn. This affair was personal. As such it developed, until that spring night at the fall roundup when it had burst forth in all its vitriol fury.

Some made bold to say that town gossips had deliberately urged the two partners into the fray as a mere diversion. But whatever the source, it had succeeded in one thing. Never was an outspoken hatred created like that which now burned between the two men. Never was a hatred more recognized and respected.

The roundup ended without bloodshed. Long before that, however, Steve and Lem had openly declared themselves. Openly and so defiantly that ranch-hand and owner alike from the first had recognized the invisible boundary set up as a deadline between the two. Only Weeaph Junction with its railroad siding and

The helpless herd, blinded and tortured in the gale, drifted toward destruction.

loading corrals was admitted as neutral territory.

Old Pop Gallagher had been diplomatic enough to secure that. Within Pop's demain there was no gunplay. Outside of that, the face of either man was to be recognized as an open challenge.

FOR almost a year now, friends had succeeded in keeping the two men apart. And even now, as they stood facing each other a mysterious something seemed to grip them. An emotion that in moments might have found expression were it not for the hurried interruption of the dozen cowhands who rushed forward. With the first sound of an outsider's voice the fire of hate seemed to leap anew in each man's eyes.

Then came a sharp intrusion that stayed their hands.

"Remember, fellas," old Pop Gallagher's voice boomed, hollow-like, "yuh-all promised to forget yuhr differences 'round these corrals. I'm expectin' yuh both to be a keepin' yuhr promise."

With Pop's words, Lem dropped the edge of his dripping mackinaw. The threatening butt of his six-gun disap-

peared beneath. Steve's eyes followed the move. His own hand pulled slowly away from his slicker snap. In cold silence the two men stood staring.

Suddenly the blaze in Steve's eyes kindled anew as he realized that Lem had been the first to discard his advantage. Deliberately Steve's one hand pushed beneath his slicker to draw forth the makings from his vest pocket. His eyes still held to Lem. He seemed struggling to hold his calm.

"Lem," his voice finally rasped, dull as the rustle of the paper between his fingers, "I'm gettin' tired of ridin' these parts expectin' a snake to strike me from behind every time I puts my heels on an elder clump."

"Reckon a polecat's built close enough to the ground to be considerable worried 'bout snakes," Lem drawled. "M'self, I'm gettin' tired of that polecat aroma 'round this range."

Steve's fingers doubled into a half clinch as he struggled to roll his cigarette. "That bein' the case," he managed to speak, "I calculates it's 'bout time fer a show-down."

Lem said, "I'm listenin' for details."

Steve seemed to suck for breath as his dry lips attempted to moisten the fold of his cigarette. "The boys'll be caught up on tallyin' and loadin' 'bout sundown," he spoke. "After that I rides in to the Tangled-V to straighten shipment papers. Reckon sun-up would be a right proper hour. Any favorite locality yuh'd like to have claim yuhr carcass?"

Lem allowed a queer grin to twist the corner of his thin lips. Lazily he drew himself erect.

"Bein' so there won't be any howl of playin' favorites, the prairie up on the plateau above Wolf Canyon 'pears right proper to me. That's open range an' the elder clumps is a mite scarce, bein' as yuh-all's so worried 'bout heelin' past the like."

"That'll suit," sounded the growl from Steve's throat, as he stuffed his thin cigarette between his lips. " 'Bout sun-up, suppose. An' jest so this don't settle down to no brush-jumpin' affair, I'll be packin' a .30-30. That'll make lead welcome on sight."

"On sight," Lem repeated. "Sun-up on the prairie above Wolf Canyon. Reckon that's understood."

Both men turned their backs and with gruff commands to their respective crews, ordered them back to their tasks. Silently each crew took its orders. Every man knew better than to attempt a word, to offer a comment. This was a personal affair. It had been arranged in man fashion. Tomorrow at sun-up would come the crisis. Still silent, the men of both crews held to their work.

At sun-down, Steve and the Tangled-V crew departed. Shortly after dark Lem ordered his men to their mounts and started them on the trail to the home ranch. Lem trailed his crew to the home ranch corrals and turning over his mount to the roustabout, retired to the bunk house. The next few hours found him absorbed in inspecting and oiling his .30-30 Winchester, while his brace of six-guns awaited their turn on his bunk. Later he borrowed an alarm clock from one of the hands and calmly set it at an hour before daylight. His loud snores sounded even before the last hand had skinned from his boots.

BACK at the Tangled-V, Steve Jensen also labored to acquire a dry smoothness to the mechanism of his Remington. Now and then as one of the hands entered the bunk house door, Steve glanced up nervously. Something in the cold blasts of air that shot through the door each time it was opened seemed to stir an unaccountable restlessness within him. Once he rose and, walking to the bunk house porch, stared out.

There the dampness lay in a slick glaze of ice. High above, great masses of curdled clouds rolled and tumbled across the star-spangled sky. Still the restless sense within Steve failed to name itself. Even the bursting gusts of wind that whipped and whistled about the bunk house eaves failed to transmit its warning. Steve finally rolled into his bunk and slept until the muffled jingle of the alarm clock beneath his pillow again stirred him to wakefulness.

Quickly he slipped into his clothes, inspected his brace of six-guns as he added a thigh lashing to each holster,

and hurried out past the row of sleeping men to the door. Outside the bunk house, the inky darkness of the hours before dawn lay drawn tight in a black, opaque curtain. Even the air was heavy and sluggish in its chill.

Steve groped his way to the corrals, saddled his horse, lashed his rifle's scabbard fast to his saddle, and rode out. Quickly the night swallowed all signs of the Tangled-V corrals behind.

A dozen times as Steve reined his horse along the trail that led up over the rolling hills to the prairie plateau, he slipped his rifle from its scabbard and tested its balance. A dozen times he flipped back the flap of the mackinaw and tested the draw of the six-guns at his hips.

An hour's ride would bring him to the plateau prairie. Another hour, and, with the first streaks of dawn, he should be at the canyon's rim. There would lay relief to the hate burning within him. A hate that tinged each muscle with an eager fire, numbing him against the biting sting of the wind that whipped and swirled about him.

AN hour passed. He had reached well out on the plateau. In the saddle, Steve pulled his hat brim low and bent his head against the stinging flakes. His trail led him along a drift fence, stretching invisibly in the darkness. The weird whine of the wind through its taut wires seemed to sing a second song of hate within him. Seemed to ascend with his pounding pulse, to urge him on as he muttered his battle song against the night wildness. In an hour it would all be finished.

Suddenly Steve became aware of a change in the night's weird symphony. The steady pound of his horse's hoofs had gone silent. They seemed drowned now in the vaulting shrieks of the wind. The darkness about had taken on a ghastly glow. He peered down. The ground was carpeted with snow, its softness muffling the pound of his horse's feet. He glanced up. All about was a mass of whirling white.

For the moment the wind seemed to have died. Then, suddenly, as if hurling itself with a new breath of life, it blasted anew. Within it a high-up shriek of wind came from overhead. A swing of his mount out of a shallow gully, and the storm broke full upon him.

For minutes Steve rode with head bowed to the blast, face sheltered by the slanted wide brim of his Stetson. Then slowly, with a wild crescendo of shrieks mingled with the swish of the swirling, frozen sage clumps underfoot, the storm howled its treacherous purpose.

Steve's mount was the first to realize the meaning of that howling blast. Swaying to a halt, the animal attempted to turn. The paining sting of the whipped snow, mingled with the stripped, icy foliage of the sage, whirled it back even before Steve touched the reins. Panicky for the instant, the animal attempted to bolt. Its quick, halted plunge at Steve's bridle jerk, snapped the cowboy awake.

One guarded glance over his shoulder whipped him alert. A howling blizzard was racing down upon him. Blindly he had ridden before it. That had been the tugging warning of his senses which he had disregarded. Since early night his range sense had been trying to warn him. Trying to tell him the danger ahead. Now, with the suddenness of an avalanche, the blizzard closed about him.

Steve understood the threat in the storm's scream. He felt the meaning of that creeping chill. The temperature was dropping with every minute. The wind was gaining momentum with every second. About him the very air seemed stuffed and sprayed with lashing stings of snow and ice.

A minute Steve halted in the trail. Realization gripped him as he felt his mount shiver beneath its saddle. Too well he knew the tortures and treacheries of those late winter blizzards. They swept down from the north like howling monsters of death to make tally with a gruesome score. The winters before had taught him that. Winters before when he had suffered their punishments. Winters before he had ridden herd when just such gales descended. He and Lem, they had ridden them together.

Steve attempted to whirl his horse and retrace his course. The first lash of the wind with its barrage of ice pellets and

snow turned him back. To face the gale was impossible. Its hurled defiance rasped across his skin as so many flying bits of steel. The very air with its swirling force seemed impossible to breathe.

Steve turned his back again to the gale. He had drifted too far out to turn about. His only hope was to drift with the storm. Hold it at his back and move before it. To face it was to face a hail of frozen pellets like scattering buckshot. Face a blinding curtain through which no man could be sure of direction or trail. Ahead lay a hope.

Into Steve's mind flashed a picture of the bare plateau prairie. The drift fence was somewhere on his right. The whistling whine of the wind through its stretched wires signaled its presence. If he followed the fence, it would lead him to Wolf Canyon just where the canyon rim broke from its abrupt drop of a hundred feet, into a sloping hillside, partly timbered.

If he could reach that point of the canyon rim and drop down the slope to the timber, he was safe. The canyon bottom might be drifted deep with snow, but in it he would be sheltered against this tortuous blast. Down the canyon a mile was the old range salting grounds with a tender's shack. Once there, he could sleep the storm out.

It needed no touch of spurs to urge Steve's mount on. Already the horse was moving in short, jerky strides, rump and hips bowed to the storm. Steve allowed the animal to pick its own course. Humped forward in the saddle, he crossed his arms before him and hugged his own body for warmth. Against his back, the lashed scatterings of the storm beat upon him. It whipped beneath his low-pulled hat and struck like knife points against his face.

FOR a half hour Steve's horse held to its stiff, jerky stride. The hard-breathing animal, now covered in a coat of frozen snow, seemed merely to lift its feet as the wind bowled it along. Still bowed forward in the saddle, rode Steve. Cooled now was the burning hate within him. Like cold ashes it seemed a gray taunt to his consuming rage of hours before.

No one but a fool would have ventured out onto the open prairie above Wolf Canyon in such a storm. Lem would probably never leave the Box-7 bunk house once he had a slant of the sky and a whiff of the air's warning tinge. If he had started at all, Lem had probably long since turned back. His ride to the prairie would take him against the storm. He would be able to sense it from the first gust and be able to drift homeward with the wind at his back. He had made a fool of himself in this play.

Gray shadows now leaped across the darkness. With the swirl of the storm's screen, Steve caught glimpses of the changing flashes across his snow-crusted saddle. It was getting light. Behind the lead skies the light was attempting to pierce the swirling curtain of white that now, with the ever-shrieking howl of the wind, churned like the spray of a waterfall.

Steve beat his arms against his hips as he shivered. Suddenly, his mount stopped dead. A touch of spurs, and still it refused to move. Back bowed, ears slicked back, head and mane a mask of frozen white, the animal seemed to only stand and shiver.

An instant Steve raised his head. It was daylight now, dull, shadowed daylight with the curtain of the storm drawn tight before him. A minute Steve stared ahead. Then, with the sudden sweep of a very wall of beating snow before him, he caught a glimpse beyond. He was at the canyon rim. A pace ahead the earth with its seething sea of whiteness dropped away, straight down. He had angled away from the guiding drift fence. Only his mount had realized the danger that lay one more pace ahead in the blizzard's blinding curtain.

Steve paused for direction. He had struck the canyon rim above the timbered slope. That had been his original intention. With the open canyon on one side, it would leave him only three directions in which to expect an attack from the enemy he had started in search of. He would merely turn now at an angle to the storm and trust to his horse to follow the canyon rim until they reached the break in the canyon cliffs. It could

be no more than a half mile or so to where the sheer wall lengthened out into the gentle timbered slope.

Steve pulled his horse half about and urged it on with his spurs. The animal seemed to understand the maneuver. Still holding to its slow, jerky stride, it began moving, carefully planting one foot ahead of the other as if in a grope for security. Steve bent his head to the blizzard's fury. His face was now ducked beneath his mackinaw collar until his hat brim rode the collar edge. Still the whipping snow churned in about his chin and sifted down his neck. Streaks of cold as from an icy finger drew stinging lines across his body.

With his numbed fingers Steve attempted to sweep the snow from his neck. As his head lifted for an instant, his ears were clear of the collar of his mackinaw. In that instant his breath seemed to catch. His body stiffened. To his ears had come a low, groaning rumble. A rumble like a thousand muffled moans, half drowned and swallowed by the shrieking howl of the wind. A rumble that identified itself with a jab of fear to his tortured brain.

Cattle . . . bellowing cattle. Bellowing steers, bawling heifers, and bleating calves, drifting before the storm. The sound carried even above the blizzard's trumpeting like the far-off chant of haunting range ghosts. Somewhere beyond, a helpless herd, blinded and tortured in the freezing gale, were drifting slowly before its blasts. Drifting, and drifting only in one possible direction. Drifting with the storm.

STEVE'S senses snapped from their numbed sluggishness. Wolf Canyon was one boundary to the prairie plateau of the open range. The week before had seen days that forecast spring. With that first sign, the wintering herds of the open range would work toward high land where the sun would first thaw the frozen earth and where the first blades of grass would burst through. For the past few days, undoubtedly every untended critter on the range had been working toward the plateau. Now they were caught in the storm. By instinct they would bunch. Bunch, and then as one herd, bow to the sting of the gale and drift before it.

He swung a frightened glance over his shoulder in the direction of the blizzard's course. Drift with the gale. . . . Inwardly his brain seemed to scream the thought. With the gale was toward Wolf Canyon . . . that herd was drifting slowly, blindly, weakly toward the yawning depth of Wolf Canyon with its sheer cliffs and bare rock a hundred feet below, drifting toward destruction. Sure destruction, unless. . . .

Even as Steve lifted his head and bared his face to the torturing sting of the whipping wind, his ears caught a low, screeching whine. A muffled crash, and the weird rumbling groan riding on the blizzard's wings suddenly mounted to a wild moan of panicky pain. Loud it sounded above the gale's howl.

Unless . . . Steve cursed the repeated thought. Even that hope was past. The drifting herd had milled through the drift fence. That screech had been its snapping wires. The torture of the gale had driven them against its wires, then forced them on through. Only destruction now awaited the herd.

A thousand head, tumbling blindly, one after the other over the canyon rim to death below. Piling a heaped mountain of death onto the scab-rock floor of Wolf Canyon. A thousand head, maybe more . . . who could tell the size of the herd drilling to destruction?

Steve straightened in his saddle. The chill of his numbed body seemed to vanish with the flash of the picture to his brain. The inborn trait of the cattleman, to protect his herd, consumed all sensation to his own suffering. His mind was visualizing that herd half buried somewhere in the blizzard's blinding screen. Visualizing them as they slowly poured over the canyon lip to destruction.

Steve shook himself with a sudden sweep of determination. The sloping descent into the canyon below was not over half a mile beyond, that was positive. If he could work the herd into a drift at an angle with the storm, they might come to the canyon edge at the timbered slope. Quickly sensing shelter on the protected, timbered hillside below, they would work from their mill. The

herd was not panicky. It was merely torture-maddened by the whip of the gale. A half dozen riders could easily do the work. One rider. . . . Steve pulled his horse into the teeth of the blizzard as he clamped his spurs hard.

Straight into the stinging, singing whip of ice and snow he forced his mount. The blizzard's blasts seemed to seep to his very flesh. Its zero touch stung like the cut of lashed rawhide. Bent low in the saddle, Steve panted for air as his nostrils froze shut and the blinding snow whipped beneath his hat brim to freeze like a false brow about his lashes.

Beneath him his horse coughed and choked for breath. Its mane and head was a shapeless crust of snow. Still, on, in response to its master's urge, the animal struggled.

Suddenly, Steve pulled his horse short. Ahead, looming through the driving curtain of swirling white like some phantom ghost picture, milled a seething circle of white. Only its outer rim was distinguishable. Dark, staggering blotches in a sea of white. Slowly they moved in the arc of their circle. Heads low, eyes and nostrils clustered over with great chunks of pounded snow, frozen solid with the moisture of their own breath, the herd milled. Milled blindly, helplessly, aimlessly, moaning comfort, one to the other, as, by the close rub of their bodies, they kept contact.

A wave of hopelessness swept Steve. What could one man do with that milling herd? What could one man hope to do? They were blind. Every animal of that outer circle was moving with eyelids frozen shut or caked over with snow slugs. Every animal was now but a beast of blind instinct, struggling to the one command of its senses to keep moving and keep upon its feet. How could one man hope to force that herd to respond to any range trick?

A WILD whip of the wind for a minute screened the milling herd behind a lashing blizzard cloud. Steve bent his head and sucked for breath as the blast numbed him. Then, as his eyes looked up and peered into the whipping blindness, he jerked erect. Ahead a single black object was moving, clear of the drifting herd. A single object that sat erect upon a snow-painted animal's back. A rider. A lone rider struggling at the very task his brain had a moment before given up as hopeless. A lone rider attempting to turn the sweep of that circling herd.

Even as he clamped spurs to his mount in an urge ahead, Steve grasped an understanding to the rider he had glimpsed through the blizzard's lashing veil. Someone had been riding the drift fence that morning and had been caught in the blizzard the same as he. That rider had perhaps for hours been attempting to turn the herd. Attempting to swing them in a reverse direction to their milling and work in the stronger and unpunished cattle, in the center of the herd, to the outer circle where they might be forced in a direction desired.

Twenty yards, and Steve was almost to the lone rider's side. Through the blinding snow screen he could make out only a snow-clustered mass. The man's face beneath his low-pulled hat loomed a frozen mask of white. Steve waved his hand in a signaling motion of warning toward the canyon rim.

"The canyon! The canyon!" he screamed into the storm, as his very words whipped in a sting against his lips. "It's only a hundred yards yonder."

"I know . . . I know," came the muffled answer as the wind smothered the shouted words to a mumbled mutter. "We got to turn them. Work them for the canyon break."

His own hand copied the movement of the man across as from the scabbard at his side the rider pulled a rifle and pounded the snow from its hammer against the saddle horn. Steve understood. The tactic was the only range trick possible. One desperate attempt to halt that outer circle of steers in their path and, by throwing an obstacle in their front, cause them to turn and reverse their direction. Attempt to reverse the outer circle's course with a wall of dead critters and lead-spitting rifle muzzles. It was the only hope.

The snow-crusted rider was moving forward. He bent low as he held his rifle

in one gloved hand. Steve spurred his horse to his side. His own rifle was held ready. It was do or die. They were riding into a very churning wheel of trampling death, if that milling herd should refuse to turn. If they should close about them in the path they would cut through the circle edge with blazing rifles. If they should hold to their drift . . . then their fate was the fate of the herd. Either they would go down to be trampled to death beneath those thousands of pounding hoofs or be swept over the canyon rim by the force of their surge.

They were at the circle's edge. The moaning bawl of a thousand critter throats echoed above the blizzard's shriek like a wail from eternity. Ice-puddled faces, solid masks of frozen snow and breath moisture, plowed jerkily by. Swung slowly past, lowing in their misery, moving blindly with only instinct and the pressure of their rubbing ribs as a guide.

A rifle shot cracked. Another. Steve's gun swung into action. Whang! Whang! Whang! Whang! The storm's shriek swallowed the reports like splashes in the surf. Drowned them, but each bit of lead had its target.

Down went a mammoth, lunging steer, a terrific bawl choking in its throat. Down went another. Another. A black gap opened in the milling circle. A wedged opening, floored with kicking bodies of dying critters, fenced by wild-eyed beasts that, whipped to a panic by the sudden onslaught, attempted to respond to a reverse surge of instinct and turn about in their course.

Into this opening pushed the two riders and their mounts. Loud even in the shriek of the gale screamed their voices. Louder still rose the bawling, bellowing cry of the herd in their chaos of terror. The blizzard vaulted with it. The protesting howl of the gale echoed with it. The blood-stained snow beneath painted the price.

STEVE poked his empty rifle back into its scabbard as he groped beneath his mackinaw for his six-guns. The gap in the milling circle was open. Now to hold it. To open it wider and peel back that blinded outer circle of bellowing beasts into a reverse direction. Now for the test.

Kicking, shouting, firing pistol muzzles into the very nose of the terror-stricken herd, the two riders plunged deeper into the milling circle. By reason of the bullet-dropped barrier before them, the circle gap widened. Then, suddenly, both men swung their horses. The wedge was wide and deep. The outer circle had ceased its movement and now only trampled in its tracks. Deep inside the circle the herd still milled. Now to turn back that outer edge. Fold it back into a zigzag toward safety and protection.

The rider at Steve's side forced his mount's chest directly into the rump of a pawing steer. The animal leaped ahead as with his spurred heel the man brought one foot up into a blow at the animal's hip. The critter ahead made to turn and charge. A crack of a six-gun, and the animal dropped. Another flash of flame, and a doubtful animal whirled. The rider at Steve's side pushed his advantage. The outer circle was turning, flaring out and heading at an angle to the blizzard's fury. The terror of that unknown rider's charge was overcoming the torture of the storm to the milling beasts. They were swinging. Zigzagging into a new course to their drift. A course angling against the storm.

Both men fought with mount, gun, and cry. An instant Steve shouted his own blast of victory. They were winning. They were turning back the key to their maneuver. Then, even as his voice whipped back to his own ears in the lash of the gale, he felt his mount stumble. Felt the struggling animal fight for its head. Heard its agonizing groan and in the instant realized the cause as his saddle dropped from beneath him.

His horse had been gored. The low, swaying horns of a fear-maddened steer had ripped his mount from flank to belly and then, with one frantic toss of the head, pierced the animal deep. In its dying groan the horse fought to hold to its feet. Steve had only the instant's warning as the game animal struggled to hold itself erect to the last breath. Then, as it caved, dying to the blood-trampled snow beneath, Steve flung himself from his saddle and with a leap swung onto

the back of a terror-maddened steer alongside.

The piercing shriek of a dying horse. The terrified bellow of fear-crazed cattle. The challenging howl of a raging blizzard . . . for an instant all roared in Steve's ears. His body was stiff with cold. The back of the steer he straddled was slick with snow and ice. Only the dig of his spurs into the critter's flesh held him. He felt his feet jostled about. He fought for balance as the terrified animal bolted ahead, to hurl that unknown from its back.

An instant Steve visioned himself trampled beneath that seething mass of bawling, frozen hell. An instant he almost felt the agony of piercing hoofs. Then into a sudden stage of clearness in the blizzard loomed his companion in the venture. Straight into the mêlée he was pushing his horse. Straight at him. His snow-cluttered form swayed like a staggering giants.

Down swung his arm as with six-gun he crashed the gun barrel across the ears of the blocking beast. His low-pulled hat swept clear of his head and with hair whipping free to the gale's roar, he pounded a path toward the bucking critter on which Steve still struggled for balance.

A shout, an iron-like clutch about his waist, and Steve felt himself half lifted clear of the twisting critter to the back of the horse of his rescuer. Felt his spread legs grip horse flesh again and even as his arm clamped about the body of the rider, caught a glimpse of the white-framed features of the man in the saddle before him. A glimpse of Lem MacCabe, cursing, swinging, battling as only Lem could to push his horse against the flank of that turning herd.

STEVE'S breath seemed to burn fire as it drew in. An instant he groped expectantly for that stinging flash of hate. It never came. In place, a chill of dread seized him. Lem had come to his rescue. Lem was risking his life to save his. He had been safe on that outer circle there, but with the crash of his horse, Lem had turned his mount deliberately back into the herd. Fought his way into that seething mass of living death for him. Steve's arms about Lem's waist gripped tighter.

Wildly the blizzard howled its hope. Wildly Lem, with Steve clinging atop his mount to rear, hurled his efforts into the death tide. At the outer circle's edge the herd was folding back. Lapping backward into a reverse of the direction of their mill. They were drifting at an angle to the blizzard's sweep now. Drifting, but, as they moved, closing into a solid mass about the two battling riders atop the single, struggling horse.

Blindly the swaying horse beneath them fought to hold its feet. On every side bawling, moaning cattle jolted and shoved in the rush of their madness. The weight of an added rider tortured the animal in its battle for footing. Atop its back the two riders were helpless except to attempt, with kicks and swinging gun barrels, to hold back the crushing circle of milling beasts. The herd had engulfed them, closed about them completely. And now, as they fought, working slowly into a new course, it was drawing them deeper into its center.

Steve sensed the impossibility of their fight. That horse beneath them, with their double weight, could never stand the test. Already the game little animal was swaying weakly as it fought for footing amidst that crowding, maddened herd. For one man there was a chance. With one man atop its back, the animal might hold to its feet and battle its way clear to the circle edge. With two. . . .

Lem barely held his mount erect as it stumbled over some unseen object underfoot, then, with snorting puffs, pawed for footing. The pointed horns of one crazed critter brushed Steve's leg and, catching in the saddle stirrup, jerked the animal sideways. Only the quick bark of Lem's six-gun held them from going down beneath trampling hoofs.

With the next step Steve realized the horse had been gored, as well. The horn that had caught the stirrup had pushed forward and ripped a wide wound in the horse's shoulder. The animal was now staggering beneath the wound's torture.

An instant Steve lifted his head and swept a glance about. The howl of the blizzard screened all before him in its barrage. The sea of backs seemed to

heave and weave. They were drifting deeper into the herd. Losing their fight. For the two of them there was no chance. For one, a fighting chance if only the horse could hold its feet.

Steve's wrapped arms about Lem's waist relaxed. An instant they dropped and held only to the rear of the saddle.

AHEAD, with the withdrawal of the arms, Lem whirled. Sight of Steve's face almost against his own cracked Lem's white frosted lips into a grin. Steve answered with a twist of his own lips. A meaning twist that in the same moment caused his one hand to reach out and grip firmly of Lem's arm.

"Good luck, Lem," Steve's voice blasted almost in Lem's ears.

"Reckon I was wrong, Lem. I'm sorry."

Steve released his grip on Lem's arm and, reaching out, made to slip from the horse's back and once more slide to the snow-slicked shoulder of a steer alongside. The quick pull of Lem's ready hand held him atop the mount. A muttered curse upon his lips, Lem stared over his shoulder.

"Yuh damned locoed fool, what yuh tryin' to do?" screamed Lem's voice into his face.

"Reckon one's 'bout all this little horse can 'commodate, Lem," Steve shouted in answer. "Yuh got a chance alone. Me ridin' double here's too much. I calculate on takin' to one of them steers' backs an' ridin' it out."

Lem's cursing voice blasted anew. "Yuh crazy galoot," screamed his words, "think I care 'bout ridin' out of here alone? We're ridin' out of here double, Steve, or we ain't ridin' out at all. Clamp on them spurs, cowboy!"

With a jerk of Steve's arm, Lem wrapped it again about his waist. A queer choke in Steve's throat smothered his reply.

Somehow the bellowing of the milling herd lost its cry of warning. The howl of the blizzard seemed but a murmur in his ears. Its chill vanished. Vanished in a warming flash of emotion that tingled his every vein.

"Jest's yuh say, partner," came Steve's final attempt. "Reckon them bein' mutual sentiments, we-all's as good as out right now."

In the saddle ahead Lem's six-gun barked once in reply. A steer reared and swung to the side as a bullet clipped its ear. Lem swung his horse into the opening. With kicks of his feet and sweeps of his gun barrel, Steve attempted to hold clear the mass on either side. Even the spent little horse seemed to sense the new spirit of its riders atop. Its staggering legs stiffened with the urge.

A minute of close battle as the beasts again closed in, and then as suddenly as if the howling elements had rung down a curtain to the scene, the tumult lessened. The milling herd began to fan. Instead of crowding in, they began to straighten and sweep out. An instant Steve wondered. Then as he felt the sharp angle of the horse's back beneath him, he realized. They had reached the canyon break. Ahead, the herd was rushing down its slope toward the timber line, fanning out as they went. The timbered slope was offering its sheltering break to the storm's sweep.

Ten minutes later two snow-crusted punchers bent low atop the limping horse as they guided the hard-breathing animal along a smooth snow trail, beaten deep by the lowing herd ahead. The arms of one still lay wrapped about the waist of the rider ahead.

"Reckon that shack should be around right close hereabouts, Lem," Steve was speaking. "Spects we can hole out there till this storm blows over."

"Reckon that's best, partner," came Lem's answer. "Calculate a little fire wouldn't hurt much, either. From the looks of that snoot of yuhr'n, yuh-all's frozen stiff."

"That beak of yuhr's ain't no sign of warmth, Lem," echoed Steve. "Know, Lem, when I first saw yuh out there a tryin' to turn that herd, I didn't even recognize yuh, yuh looked so danged frozen like."

"Didn't recognize yuh either, Steve," answered Lem. "When I did, though . . . reckon, Steve, it takes somethin' like this to make a dang fool gather together his common sense."

"A couple of dang fools," cut in Steve.

ROPE FOR A STRANGER

By STEPHEN PAYNE

T-C cattle were missing, the T-C foreman lay dead. This didn't make Pelly Graham a killer, but the posse offered him only a little rope — to start with.

PELLY GRAHAM was a mile distant from his destination, the T-C ranch, when a shot from the bushy hillside brought down his horse. As he threw himself clear, a second bullet hummed through his hat, taking with it a wisp of jet-black hair, and he dropped flat behind the prone horse just as a third bullet passed over his head.

Upon the hillside the young cowpuncher saw rising wisps of smoke.

"Crack!" The rifle spoke for the fourth time, its leaden messenger cutting a furrow in the fender of Pelly's saddle and humming into space only a matter of inches above the cowboy's body.

"Breastwork's plum' inadequate," he growled ruefully. "I'd as well shoot at the sun scootin' behind them mountains yonder as to return fire at this range. I got to—"

Another bullet thudded into the horse's body. Two more whined over the puncher as he cautiously reached for his rope, tied at his saddlefork on the uppermost side of the dead pony. A moment, during which the unseen marksman was doubtless reloading, the puncher debated whether to loop his rope over his saddle horn or a sagebrush growing at the canyon's rim. He decided finally on the sagebrush, which would permit him three more feet of rope, and he didn't know how deep the canyon was.

AGAIN the rifleman opened fire, raking the entire vicinity with bullets, just as Pelly looped the sagebrush, and, holding the rope, rolled over the canyon's rim. The rifle was still exploding as Pelly, his hands burning, slid the length of his lariat. Upon reaching the end, he saw he had yet some distance to drop before reaching the silvery trickle of water in the canyon, and was hesitating about taking that drop when suddenly the sagebrush loosened and he plummeted downward. But he landed on his feet in the small stream, uninjured.

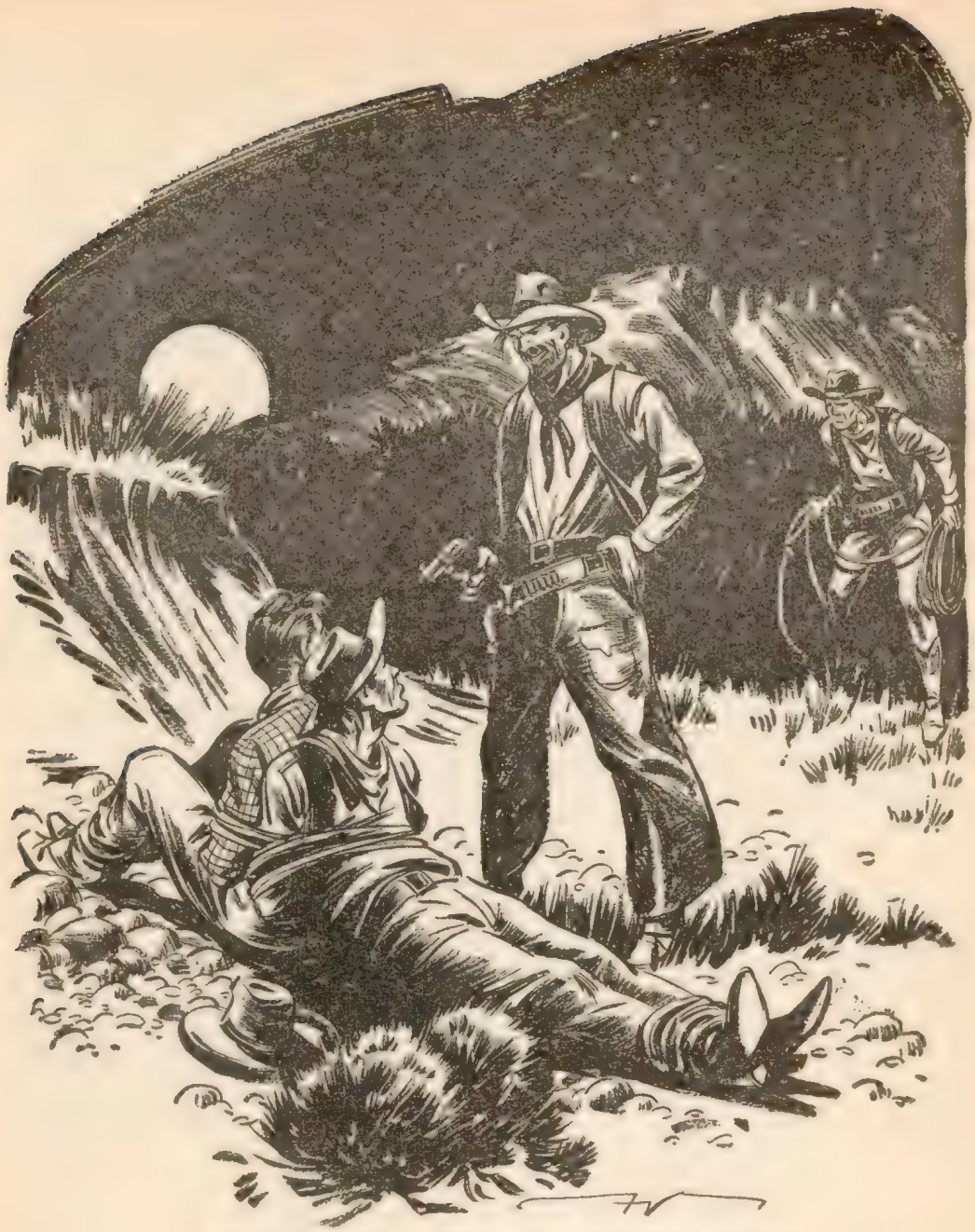
Instantly removing his coat, hat and chaps, he placed them on a chunk of driftwood so that anyone peering over the rim above might suppose these garments clothed a man. The rifleman, coming to investigate, would be unable to see clearly into the deep canyon's depth, and Pelly hoped his ruse would succeed.

Now that Pelly had escaped by the length of his rope, he had no intention of exposing himself again to the rifleman's fire. The fellow had proved a crack shot and might have others with him. Bent on reaching the T-C ranch, where he could get help to pursue the would-be killer, Pelly ran down the canyon.

Less than five minutes after his escape Pelly heard the rifleman shoot three times. The fellow had evidently stolen to the canyon's rim and sent three bullets into what Pelly had hoped would be taken for his body, lying in the creek bed.

Why anyone should attempt his murder Pelly had no idea, unless he'd been mistaken for someone else, which seemed unlikely. In this section of the country the genial young cowpuncher was a stranger to everybody excepting Cherokee Clark, who owned the T-C, and Harry Erp, his foreman. About one year ago Pelly, heading north, had stopped over night at the T-C, where both Cherokee and Erp had urged him to take a job, for Pelly was a cowboy who inspired confidence. When he had courteously declined, Cherokee had told him a job was waiting for him any time he chose to return.

Tiring of the range to the north, Pelly was intending "to spread his blankets at the T-C for quite a spell," and now, almost at his destination, his horse had been



Swiftly Pell made a loop in the rope he was carrying.

killed and he had been shot at fully a dozen times. A heck of a welcome, and doggoned queer!

When he finally came to the great valley wherein lay the T-C's fenced fields, he thought something else "doggoned queer." He saw no T-C cattle. It was fall; Cherokee Clark certainly should have his stock gathered and under fence, but there were none in the fields, and very few horses. But there *had* very recently been cattle in the fields. Pelly saw their tracks.

IN case that coldblooded jigger was still watching, Pelly kept in the willows along the stream and thus made his way to the T-C ranch buildings, located on a knoll east of the stream. To his surprise and alarm, stables, corrals, bunkhouse and main house were silent, dark and deserted. No dog barked; no horse voiced a whinny. The kitchen stove in the unlocked house was still warm. Other signs indicated that someone had been there.

It was just light enough for Pelly to read tracks and signs in the yard. Two hombres had packed a hoss with grub out of that kitchen and headed west. He saw something on the ground. Something had been dragged along there. And he followed the impressions which led to the cellar back of the house.

By the light of a match, inside that cellar a minute later, Pelly Graham received a ghastly surprise. On the dirt floor of the dark cellar the weirdly flickering flame showed the body of a man, whose glazed, open eyes stared lifelessly. The match burned Pelly's fingers and darkness shut the gruesome object from his sight. Forcing control of his nerves by sheer will power, the puncher lighted another match, stooped over the stiff, cold body, and recognized Harry Erp, the T-C foreman.

He had been shot twice! His six-shooter was buckled about his body, and as Pelly's trembling hands lighted other matches to remove belt and gun, the puncher discovered that the weapon had not been fired recently.

"Shot in the back!" Pelly gritted hoarsely. "Hadn't a chance. Nobody but a good tracker would have found his body. Where's Cherokee Clark? Where're his punchers?"

Outside the cellar, under the stars which were just peeping out, Pelly put two and two together. Harry Erp killed; no stock in the fields; two men had packed a horse and headed west.

Those three things meant rustlers working on a big scale. Upon approaching the T-C, he, too, had been shot at from ambush with intent to kill.

It occurred to the puncher that he ought to get help at the nearest ranch, but he did not know its location, nor that of the nearest town. Moreover, if he delayed, the killers and thieves might get out of the country. Two men recently at the ranch buildings and one man shooting at him indicated there might be three in the gang. But Pelly would have darkness and the element of surprise as his allies. Having buckled Erp's belt and holstered gun about his body in addition to his own, and failing to find any rifle, he considered means for taking up the killers' trail.

FORTUNATELY there were in the wide meadow-field half a dozen horses, which Pelly was able to corral on foot. They proved a poor bunch from which to select a saddle horse; two crippled work horses, three decrepit mares with large colts, and one sleek roan gelding whose very looks showed it had never been saddled or haltered. However, the roan had more speed and stamina than any of the others and was the best bet. The rustlers had probably left it behind because they could not drive it away from the old mares, with which they could not bother.

There were a saddle, a bridle, a hackamore and plenty of ropes in the stable, so Pelly roped the roan around the neck, snubbed it to a post, and choked it down.

"Knew you weren't even halter-broke," he muttered as he hog-tied the animal, and saddled it while it thrashed about on the ground. "Some cayuse for a man to ride when he's trailin' human buzzards that'll shoot at sight."

He put both a hackamore and a bridle on the horse, knowing the latter would do little good, blindfolded the roan and permitted it to get to its feet. Holding the hackamore rope Pelly opened the corral gate. The next moment he slipped up into the saddle and jerked off the gunnysack blindfold, retaining it in his hand. With a shrill squeal the roan shot out of the corral, bucking high, landing hard, weaving from side to side, but fortunately westward in the right direction.

Pelly was no professional bronco-buster, and the powerful roan was giving him a shaking up he would long remember but, gritting his teeth, he vowed he'd stick. And stick he did. The roan splashed across the little stream and, desperately frightened by this strange human creature who fanned it with the sack first on one side of its head and then on the other, sped across the field like a dog-chased cat.

Reaching the outside fence of this field, Pelly turned the speeding animal northward along it, while he sought tracks indicating which way the rustlers had gone. These he found, leading through a set of bars which the thieves had not bothered to put up when they had driven the T-C cattle out and westward into the hills.

The roan ran on past these bars, and Pelly was put to it to turn the animal. Cursing for not having ridden one of the old, crippled plugs, Pelly in desperation took down the rope at his saddlefork, dropped the loop over the horse's rump and yanked. The roan kicked up, attempted to turn to the right, met Pelly's sack on that side of its head, and popped out through the bars, running pell-mell once more.

Pelly stuck in the saddle, but he was soon winded and weary.

An hour later the roan dropped to a shuffling trot, refusing to move faster. Pelly had already realized that this unbroken bronc would prove a handicap in any battle with rustlers, and was tempted to turn back. But Harry Erp had been shot in the back and Cherokee Clark's cattle were being stolen. Pelly had liked both Erp and Cherokee that once when he had met them. Hearing cattle bawling somewhere ahead, the puncher, disregarding all tracks, rode grimly toward the sound.

The roan reached the chest of a low hill. There in a valley ahead was a dark blur of moving animals, which, from the bawling, Pelly knew was cattle; one rider being behind the herd at its right flank, another at its left. He tried to turn the roan to the right to circle the herd and come upon one or the other of those riders unawares, but in vain, for it had grown accustomed to Pelly's sack. As Pelly tugged on bridle reins and hackamore rope the roan bowed its neck and breaking into a lope, carried its rider directly toward the herd.

There were two men in sight. It was dark and quiet and the distance between was far.

He drew his six-shooter, and the roan did exactly what Pelly had feared. It voiced a sort of gurgling whinny. The rider nearest Pelly turned his pony to face that sound, while the fellow far over on the left came galloping around the cattle.

"Who're you?" came the challenge, and starlight glinted on a Colt in the nearest rider's hand.

"I hate to do it," ran Pelly's thought, "but the first shot's the one that counts in this scrap."

IN answer to that sharp challenge his gun flamed. The bullet struck the tall rider in the right arm and his gun dropped. Emitting a terrific snort Pelly's horse wheeled about face. Yet in spite of that the puncher's second shot struck the head of the horse under the tall rider and the animal dropped, hurling its rider free as it fell. The second rustler, hurtling forward, fired twice at Pelly, whose unmanageable roan was now madly racing away. Pelly, unhit, slid from the roan's back, rolled over twice as he hit the ground, and sat up as the second cattle thief's horse was almost upon him. This animal leaped sidewise to avoid Pelly, and its rider's third shot went wide.

Then two vivid flashes of fire cut the night as two Colts barked as one. The rustler's shot cut Pelly's sun-tanned right cheek and hummed into space. But Pelly's bullet cut a tiny furrow in his enemy's scalp and he reeled out of his saddle. The horse ran on for a short distance, stopped, and stood snorting. Speeding to the fallen man, Pelly glanced at him for a second, and rushed toward the tall rider who was on his feet, attempting to jerk a rifle from a scabbard underneath the dead horse.

"Quit it!" barked Pelly, and the fellow, standing erect, raised both his arms.

"Any more of you back-shootin' skunks?" Pelly demanded.

The fellow shook his head. "Only us two," he growled surlily.

"Good 'nough!" and Pelly soon had the man's hands tied behind his back. Then he marched him back to the other, who was still stunned, tied that individual's hands, tied both men's feet, and tied them to sagebrushes about twenty feet apart.

"I'll question you geezers later," he announced. "Right now I've got to turn them cattle back toward home."

The moment the battle had started the herd had broken into a lumbering gallop in the direction in which they were being driven. Pelly knew they would not run very far, and would go home of themselves if he headed them back toward the T-C. As he walked to catch the rustler's horse, which stood near with bridle reins down, he said to himself:

"Kinda funny there were only two of these geezers when I'm pretty dead sure one of this bunch tried to plug me. Ought

to have been at least one more, but if there was, wouldn't he have been with the herd?"

Catching the horse, which did not bear a T-C brand, Pelly swung onto it and loped to head off the cattle. As he rode up around the herd, which was strung out for nearly a mile, he observed, mixed in with the cattle, many horses, one of them packed, which bore out his surmise that a horse had been packed at the T-C.

PELLY was a mile from his prisoners and just ahead of the cattle when five mounted men popped over a hill and galloped straight toward him. Abreast they thundered forward, all carrying six-shooters in their hands, and one roared out:

"Grab atmosphere, yuh dang rustler! Drill him, boys, if he makes one bobble!"

"Rustler, nothin'!" yelled Pelly. He couldn't fight five men, and they were so close that flight was out of the question. He would be shot down.

"Who're you?" he shouted.

"Get them paws up afore yuh die with yort boots on!" bellowed the leader, a stocky, bull-necked man wearing a slouchy black hat.

Pelly slipped the bridle reins into his teeth and raised his arms. As the five plowed to a halt ten feet from him, the black-hatted man rumbled.

"That's better. Yuh're showin' sense. I never seen yuh afore, but my name's Black. I run the L-D spread. Three o' these waddies are my men. 'Tother's a T-C rannie."

"Well, I'm doggoned glad to see you boys," Pelly cut in. "My handle's Pelly Graham."

"Yuh shot Harry Erp and tried to swipe the T-C cattle," thundered Black. "Where the blazes is the rest of your gang?"

Pelly was dumfounded. Black accusing *him* of Erp's murder! He made a throaty, gasping sound and one in the party yammered: "Rest of 'em must be fannin' the breeze outa the country. How many did yuh see, Dick?" to one of his companions.

"Two," was the reply. "It's just kinda accidental, or providential, that I seen anything. This rustlin' gang sure never figgered on nobody showin' up to bother 'em. They must 'a' knowed old Cherokee and all us rannies except Harry Erp had gone to the railroad to bring back a little bunch of dogies."

"Ye-ah, yuh've told us how-come afore, Dick," Black said crisply. "Ol' Cherokee sent yuh back home. You saw two jiggers shoot Erp. He one of the two yuh saw, Dick?"

"One of them *was* tall like this jigger, and had a hat the same color and a shirt like this hombre."

"What the blue blazes you fellows trying to do?" Pelly exploded. "I never killed Erp. Now listen—"

"Where're your pards?" snapped Black.

"I'll lead you boys right to the coyotes that stole these cattle," shouted Pelly. "Didn't you hear a lot of shooting?"

"Heard somethin', but indistinct. Been ridin' like blazes from the northeast. My ranch is nigh twenty miles northeast of the T-C, so was a considerable distance off when we heard that noise."

"Say," Pelly cried suspiciously, "how come you waddies cut across into these hills 'stead of going right to the T-C?"

"Dick, this T-C puncher, couldn't see no reason for Erp's killin' unless thieves aimed to run off Cherokee's stock. He led us across country to head them rustlers off on the only trail they could follow," Black returned shortly.

Dick, who had ridden forward to disarm Pelly, now cried:

"Look, boys! This hombre's got Harry Erp's gun and belt! I'd know 'em in hell."

"Uh? What's that prove?" Black growled.

"That he was one of them as done it!" Dick yammered. "He's a plum' stranger. Anybody here ever seen him afore?"

"Nope!" said Black. "Cowboy," to Pelly, "yuh said yuh'd lead us to the coyotes as stole these cattle. We know dang well yuh're one of them thieves, but lead out. One of us'll ride to your right and one to your left."

"He'll lead us into a trap!" shouted Dick. "He's got poor old Harry's gun. That's proof he was one of the two as killed Harry. Let's stretch his neck pronto and take our chances of findin' the rest of the gang."

"Cool off, cool off," returned Pelly. "I'll open your eyes. Line up 'round me any way you please, boys, and come on."

"Jus' a second. We're goin' to give yuh a chance, feller," announced Black. "But them cattle needs to be headed for home. Two of you waddies haze 'em back that way. Dick and me and Dank'll ride with this jigger."

"I tell yuh he'll lead us into an ambush," Dick shouted.

"Scared?" grinned the burly rancher. "Come on, Danks, and Dick, if yuh ain't too scairt. Lead out, rustler," to Pelly. "I'm ridin' behint yuh and I sure can shoot."

"I believe you," said Pelly. "And you'll believe me when you see two human snakes hog-tied and staked to sagebrushes."

WHEN the puncher and his three grim guards reached the spot where Pelly had fought with the two rustlers, Pelly could find neither the horse which he had thought he killed, nor the two cattle thieves whom he had tied so securely. Staggered by this Pelly gazed about, muttering, "This is the place all right. And," squinting closely at the ground, "here are tracks."

"But where's them prisoners?" demanded Black.

"Men, somebody's turned the two scoundrels loose. There's other rustlers around here somewhere."

"Huh? What kind of a line yuh been givin' us?" bellowed Dick. "Yuh had Erp's gun. Then yuh tell us a whoppin' big lie 'bout havin' two prisoners. Where'd yuh get that horse yuh're forkin'?"

"Took him from one of the rustlers," Pelly retorted hotly. "Cowboy, I don't know as I blame you for bein' ringy, but hold your horses; I sure can explain—"

"Explain your big lie? Explain Erp's gun?" Dick yowled. "We catch yuh with them T-C cattle. Black, I'm done listenin' to this danged killer. He plugged Harry Erp. He stole the stock. Let's stretch his neck while we got him. And when we get the noose on him he'll tell which way his pards headed."

"Hombre," said Black grimly, "I tried to give yuh a chance and yuh lied, to gain time, I reckon. Dick, where's a tree?"

"Say, you doggoned fools," Pelly snapped, "the real rustlers are gettin' further out of the country every minute."

"Uh-huh," grunted Black. "Some, but not all. We got *yuh*. Which way'd your pards go?"

"My pards nothin'! But I wish I knew where them coyotes went."

"Oh, yuh know all right," Dick snarled, "and yuh'll tell pronto."

Westward toward a heavy growth of pines silhouetted on a ridge not far distant rode the three men and their prisoner. Pelly could not see any of the cattle or horses, but he could hear the two punchers who were driving them back toward the T-C. Except for this, Pelly would assuredly have thought these men who had caught him were rustlers. They seemed determined to end his life, refusing to believe anything he said.

Could he blame them? He was a complete stranger. On his only visit to the T-C he had not met Dick, the hot-head, who had reason for wrath and for wishing revenge on a man he believed had killed Foreman Erp. Pelly had been caught with the foreman's gun, and the rustled herd, and had failed to make good on his promise to show the two prisoners. Small wonder the case against him looked black. Pelly wondered about the horse he had believed to be dead, and concluded that the animal must have been merely creased and stunned. His own unbroken bronc had wheeled at the moment Pelly had fired, so it was quite possible his shot had not been fatal.

As they neared the pine-covered ridge Pelly noted the dense timber, and the many large trees which grew among the scrubbier jack pines. His hands were not tied, nor was he tied to his horse—the only points in his favor. Black, his Colts in his hand, rode at the puncher's right; Danks at his left. Dick brought up the rear, his pony's nose almost touching the tail of Pelly's horse. Ten feet from the edge of the timber Pelly made his decision. He had one slim chance of escape. He would risk bullets rather than feel a noose about his neck. Gazing off to the right he suddenly yelled:

"Two men there in the brush! Guns! See 'em?"

Instinctively the three men turned their gaze and their weapons toward the spot Pelly indicated, and as they did so the

puncher's body dropped along the left side of his horse. His spurs ripped its flanks, and like a shot leaving a cannon the pony bounded ahead, vanishing into the timber as though by magic.

GUNS roared. Lurid oaths rang out. "Tricked, by thunder!" sounded Black's voice, and the three men crashed into the jack pines scarcely ten feet behind their quarry. Two of their horses attempted to pass through a narrow opening, collided, and half fell. Dick, who was behind, wheeled around in order to pass the two, and all three lost time and ground.

Meanwhile Pelly's mount, dodging among the trees, was scooting up the hill like a deer. Branches whipped the rider. His legs smashed against trees. He was glad it was pitchy dark in the timber, but his horse was making a terrible racket, by which the three could follow him. The horse he was riding showed that it would go on without a rider, and Pelly decided that if he were on foot in this dark timber his three pursuers would have small chance of finding him. He jerked loose his rope—the only weapon he now had—tied the bridle reins to the saddle horn and jumped off.

On up the hillside ran the horse. Pelly scooted behind a bushy jack-pine just a second before one rider flashed past at his right, two more at his left.

He walked carefully down the hill to the edge of the starlit valley. *Where* were the two cattle thieves he had caught earlier that night and the one or more of their allies who had released them? Had they abandoned the stolen herd and quit the country?

Less than a quarter of a mile away he could make out the cattle, in a compact bunch, moving down the valley. Behind him in the timber he heard sounds of the chase and presently a chagrined yell.

Then Dick's harsh voice boomed:

"The slippery coyote's give us the slip. Got his hoss, but not him."

"And you'll put in a lot of hours combin' this brush afore yuh do find him," Pelly grunted, and a tall and heavily branched tree growing at the edge of the valley attracted his gaze. If he were up in that tree he could see many things, himself unseen. From that vantage position he might spot the rustlers he believed to be in the vicinity.

Crashing down the hillside in a spread-out order came Black, Danks and Dick, and rode out into the open valley, Dick leading Pelly's mount. They drew together scarcely twenty feet from Pelly's place of concealment and Dick growled in a thwarted, angry tone:

"Holler to them other punchers, Black, to come an' help us hunt that lousy cuss."

"Hey, you cowboys with them dogies," the stocky, black-hatted man boomed, "come yere, both of yuh."

Leaving the cattle, the two riders came loping across the valley. Black and his companions rode to meet them, moving away from Pelly's hiding place. As the two newcomers drew near, Dick shouted what had occurred, but the cowboys, without answering, rode to within six feet of the three men awaiting them. Pelly noted that they rode the same ponies which the two men Black had sent with the herd had ridden, and looked the same in garb and size.

Almost as astonished was he as were Black, Danks and Dick when, with lightning-like movements, these two riders jerked their six-shooters and snapped simultaneously:

"Up with the hands. Quick!"

Caught unaware, with their own guns holstered, Black and Danks instantly raised their arms. Dick went for his. Out it came as a yellowish flame flashed in the darkness, and Dick reeled in his saddle. His gun fell but his left hand caught his saddlehorn, and he remained on his horse.

"Hey, what's this mean? Who're you jiggers?" shouted Black.

"Case yuh ain't tumbled yet," retorted the other, "we're two of the hombres what stole the T-C cattle. Yah, and we got your other two waddies tied up solid. They thunk we was you jiggers when we rid up onto 'em as they was hazin' the herd. Consequent, with surprise helpin' us, we didn't have to shoot a-tall. You fellers say that cussed meddlin' cowpuncher got away."

Black choked for a few moments before he could speak; then growled, "'Cussed meddlin' cowpuncher'? Yuh're callin' one of yore own men kinda funny names.

Ye-ah, he got away and I 'spect'll join yuh in a minute or two."

The leader of the two rustlers cursed savagely.

"That hombre one of us?" he snarled. "Not no time! It's jus' plain hell fer us that he slipped outa your hands. Dang him, he's got more lives'n a cat!"

Pelly slid down the tree as cautiously as a cat. He was within a hundred feet of his objective when he heard hoof-beats behind him, and looking back, saw coming his way the silhouetted forms of the two rustlers and their three prisoners.

He could now plainly see three saddled horses and beyond them in the sagebrush two men seated on the ground, tied together back to back, while a third, a tall hand, watched these two.

Swiftly Pelly made a loop in the rope he was carrying, leaped erect and sent the loop swishing over the rustler's head. As a trained cavvy roper nooses a broncho, he jerked it tight around the man's neck, and that same jerk pulled down the man, who was forced to drop his gun to fight the rope with his one good hand; and Pelly went up the rope as a mechanical monkey up a string. Snatching up the man's Colt, Pelly rapped him over the head, and the figure slumped down soundlessly. Pelly jerked off the man's hat and dark coat, slipped into them, and stood erect himself with the Colt in his left hand. There was no time to untie the two punchers. The other rustlers, leading the horses of their prisoners, were almost upon him.

They reined up and the leader boomed:

"Wall, Lengthy, we got the other three hounds as was with this five-man posse, but"—with a curse—" that wampus cat what plugged yuh in the arm got away."

"The hell!" Pelly grunted unintelligibly.

"Wal," the leader went on, "we'll kill these five an' hide 'em where they won't be found. Then we'll run down that cat-lifed cuss. He ain't got no gun an' he's afoot. We sure can get 'im."

"I ain't so sure," drawled Pelly. "Just get stars in each hand. Both you geezers!"

In a twinkling his Colt changed from left hand to right, and now menaced the two cattle thieves. Swifter than the dip of an enraged hornet that gun vomited fire and smoke. Simultaneously with the report, the cattle thief at Pelly's feet, a dark object in the sage that the rustlers had not noticed, returned to consciousness, threw his left arm about the puncher's ankles, and Pelly fell just as he fired.

His bullet whistled into space and the rustler who had fired trained his smoking weapon on Pelly and pulled trigger; the bullet thudding into the ground an inch in front of Pelly's face. He gouged his right spur into the man who had hold of his legs, and with a shriek Lengthy Jack released his hold. Pelly drew himself up on his left elbow, and instantly both mounted rustlers fired. The reports of their guns and of Pelly's sounded as one roar. A leaden messenger cut the coat under Pelly's left arm; another singed his head above his right ear. His own bullet smashed through the brain of the boss rustler, whose horse, leaping wildly away as its rider reeled out of the saddle, received the next shot of the other mounted rustler. But it staggered away before it fell, leaving the space between Pelly and the remaining rustler clear.

Two flashes stabbed the darkness and two bullets passed so close in flight they almost met. The rustler's ball nicked Pelly's right shoulder, but the puncher's slug took him low in the neck. Again he fired wildly as his arms went wide, and his frantically shying horse carried him fifty feet before he fell to earth.

Scrambling up, Pelly turned like an enraged bull on Lengthy Jack, who was hunting a six-shooter.

"Face me and keep that good arm of yourn high," roared the puncher, and Lengthy Jack obeyed.

"Cowboy," whooped Rancher Black, "you saved the day for us. Great guns, what a scrap! Guess yuh know now we're all jake, same as we know yuh are. Untie us so we can 'pologize to yuh proper."

"Lengthy Jack, you do that untyin' with your good hand," ordered Pelly. "I'll watch yuh with my smoke wagon right handy. I'm feelin' a mite tired-like, for it's been a terrible busy evenin'."

LOCO GUNS

By WALT COBURN

It was the strangest feud that ever scorched the West—one man against a railroad! Men laughed at first, but the feud grew until Sam Coffee's name was legend.

A Novelet of the Owl-hoot Trail.

FOR five weeks the sheriff and his posse had trailed Sam Coffee and his gang. Now it looked like Sam and his men were trapped at the old CK line camp at the head of the badlands.

Sam Coffee and four men had held up a train in Wyoming. The job had been accomplished without any fuss. None of the passengers were robbed or hurt. When they had uncoupled the express car and had the engineer haul it a few miles up the tracks they told the express messenger that if he didn't open up the car they'd blow it up. Sam Coffee explained that the blowing up of the car would block traffic and that it might cause a wreck when the Eastbound came along. Flagmen were sent out to flag any trains as soon as the express messenger opened the door. The mail clerks didn't pack guns, and opened the mail car with alacrity. Sam joshed them about not packing guns to protect the registered mail.

The gang hadn't monkeyed with anything except big money. Then they had taken to the brush where their horses were waiting. There had been a man there with the waiting horses. A neat job. Sam Coffee always worked calmly and with cold courage and swiftness.

With a ten- or twelve-hour start on the posse, they headed for the badlands, bound for Montana. That night, somewhere along their route, the lot was divided and three of the men scattered, their trails lost in the rough, timbered country. The other three stayed together, leaving a plain trail. And it was this trail that the posse had followed, thinking that they were trailing six men instead of three, because the sign showed that six shod horses had traveled it. And not until they had followed it more than a hundred miles did they learn from a rancher that three men and three extra horses, carrying light packs, had come past there the day before. He described the three men. One of them was undoubtedly Sam Coffee. Another was the Stuttering Kid. The third man was Limpin' George.

The sheriff and his men kept doggedly on. Several times they lost the trail. It was summer, and the horseflies and mosquitoes were bad. They were a bearded, weary-eyed lot after the first week of the man-hunt. The sheriff, a man named Bob Robbins, sent all but six of the men back. He had been in office two years and had told those who voted him into office that he'd clean up the country and wipe out the outlaws, even if he had to kill 'em all, personal. He had already killed two men and crippled a third. They called him Shotgun Robbins or Shotgun Bob. A big, muscular man with coarse yellow hair and cold blue eyes that never smiled. Though rough in his tactics and cold-blooded as any killer, he made a good peace officer, so his friends claimed.

Others, who had not voted for him, held another opinion. They even hinted more or less openly that Shotgun Robbins stood in with a certain element whose reputation was not too pure. That he owned the biggest gambling-house and saloon in town and that his dealers were none too honest. That he owned an interest in several cow outfits that always had plenty of twins in their calf crop. And that two meat markets, suspected of handling stolen beef, belonged to him. Or, rather, to him and several other men who formed the political ring that had voted him into office.

Shotgun Bob. Wide shouldered, lean flanked, swaggering. A good dresser,

Kleats and Shotgun Bob rode toward them, firing. Sam drew as Limpin' George's gun roared.

perhaps a little too flashy, with an eye for a pretty girl and a taste for poker. A ruthless, prideful man. Hated by some, feared by many, liked by a few, perhaps, though his friends were of the type who trust no man.

And this was the man who, with six picked gunmen, followed the dangerous trail of the notorious Sam Coffee and the two outlaws who were his partners in crime.

SAM COFFEE and the other two twisted and dodged their way through the rough country. An odd trio.

Sam Coffee was a tall, rangy man with thinning brown hair that showed reddish in the sunlight. His eyes were reddish brown. His nose was large, and under a drooping, ragged red mustache was a wide mouth that grinned easily. It was his boast that he had never killed a man and that he hoped he'd never be forced to. But his swift-moving .45 had broken the gun arm of more than one man who had crowded him. Time had been when he had ridden broncs and punched cows for every big outfit in the cow country, from Mexico to Canada. But he never worked for one outfit long. A born drifter. There was always a job ready for Sam Coffee, who was a top hand.

Then came the evening, five years ago, that his younger brother had been killed by a detective who worked for the railroad company. This younger brother had been riding the grub line and had stopped at a camp in the foothills. The camp was just a small cabin, corral and shed. He had found grub there and had unsaddled his horse and staked out the animal, preparing to take advantage of that unwritten law of the cow country that allows the traveler to stop and make himself at home. It was dusk when several men rode up. They called to him as he was cooking supper. He stepped to the door, a coffee-pot in his hand. A charge of buckshot tore through his chest. He died without ever knowing who shot him, or why.

There had been a trial. The detective swore that he had seen the young cow puncher in the company of some men who had held up a train some time ago. And despite the fact that it was proved that young John Coffee had been unarmed, that he had a coffee-pot, not a gun, in his hand, the clever attorneys for the railroad company had cleared the detective.

Sam Coffee was working down in Texas when he got word about the killing. He chanced upon the newspaper account of the trial. The date of the paper was six months old. Sam caught the first train out of San Angelo. A few days later he was in the Colorado town where the trial had been held. He was curtly informed that there was nothing he could do about it. His younger brother, if not actually one of the train robbers, had at least been seen in their company. He had been found at a camp that was used by outlaws as a stopping place. Sam's reception was cold, unfriendly.

He was treated even more coldly by the railroad officials. And when he tried to locate the detective he had no success whatever. The man used half a dozen different names. He traveled all over the country in his official capacity as a man-hunter. They would give him no information.

"Then I'll take 'er up lone-handed," he told the railroad officials. "My brother was murdered by a damned glory-huntin' yellow-bellied coward. You put up the money tuh save his dirty hide. All right. I'm gittin' that dirty, lowdown skunk. And I'm makin' yore murder-hirin' outfit pay through the nose before I'm done." His brown eyes blazing, the grin gone from his leathery face, he had stalked out of the office.

ONE month later the train was held up by three men who got away with ten thousand dollars in cash. A letter came, in due time, to the railroad superintendent.

"Job number one," so read the letter. "Just a starter. Tell me where I kin locate that murderer you got on yore payroll and I will quit stoppin' yore trains. Sam Coffee."

During the following year the crack train was held up twice. Five or six men in the gang each time. The one man who wore no mask was the lanky, grinning, joshing Sam Coffee. Sam would calm the passengers with his joking as he covered them with his guns.

"I ain't takin' up no collection from you folks, so don't git scairt," he would tell them. "I'm just out like the tax collector, gittin' what this railroad company owes me. They got a reward on my homely hide, but I'd hate tuh have you folks git in danger by some locoed bonehead tryin' to collect 'er. Because I pack these pop guns fer use, not fer ornament. Lady, yuh don't need tuh be holdin' them rings in yore mouth. Supposin' yuh taken sudden-like with the hiccoughs. Mister, have yuh got the mate to that seegar? Ma'am, that young 'un uh yourn shore has yore eyes, ain't he? Shore a cute little feller. Kinda makes me think uh my kid brother John when he was a little feller. John got murdered by this here railroad company.

"Yes, folks, I said he was murdered. That's why I'm collectin'. One uh their hired gun-toters killed him. Not far from here. But that ain't cheerful talk fer the wimen folks tuh hear. But it's somethin' to remember and tell about when yuh git home. Here comes one uh the boys. He's a handsome young feller when he ain't a-wearin' that black handkerchief tied acrost his face. Just sit still, folks. Us boys is goin' up the line a ways to collect our money. Sit still and don't be scairt. We ain't harmin' nobody that tends their own business. So-long, you folks." And Sam Coffee would back out of the car, hat pulled slanting across his eyes, strong white teeth showing in a wide grin.

Then a hard ride through the rain-swept darkness, along the wild outlaw trail that led through the badlands. Never over six men in the gang. And always, among the six were the Stuttering Kid and Limpin' George.

The Stuttering Kid, tow headed, freckled, sunburned, with a blunt nose and buck teeth. He was in his late twenties and was wanted in Kansas for cattle rustling and for killing a tin-horn gambler. There was a marked impediment in his speech excepting when he sang or when he got angry. Sam Coffee had met him one evening down in New Mexico when the Kid was being followed by a possee. Sam had watched the chase through his field-glasses from where he sat his horse in a piñon ticket on a ridge. He had pulled his carbine and dropped half a dozen shots that kicked up dust in the faces of the several possemen. They had halted, then turned back, riding hard as Sam Coffee's bullets snarled around their heads.

It was several minutes before the rescued Kid could speak without stammering incoherently. Sam patched the bullet hole in his arm.

"Where'd yuh come from, feller?"

"Ju-ju-ju-jail."

"Don't like 'er there?"

"Hell, nu-nu-no!"

"Then we better be lopin' over the next skyline."

THE Stuttering Kid and Sam had found Limpin' George in an old deserted line camp that November. He was delirious with small-pox. The Stuttering Kid had gone to town for a doctor, bucking a blizzard and risking his own life and freedom for the unknown man. The doctor recognized the sick man as George Shaw, a cowman, who had been tangled up in a bloody range war, had been sentenced to prison, and had escaped. The doctor was one of the old school who never tell. He came and went. Sam and the Kid nursed George back to health.

Short, heavy shouldered, thick necked, gray haired, with a leg that had been broken years ago and which he set himself. It had left him with a decided limp. A quiet man with brooding eyes and occasional black moods that lasted sometimes a week. Sam told the Stuttering Kid that he reckoned that was when George got to thinkin' how his three sons had been killed and how his wife had died of a broken heart on account of that range war. Sam or the Stuttering Kid would risk much, then, by riding to town for a jug. Limpin' George would drink himself into insensibility, wake up next day with a headache, and drink a pot of strong, black coffee. After that he would be all right for a month or six months. A quiet sort of man, perhaps a little wrong in the brain because of his troubles.

Sam had seen George's ranch once. The ranch in Wyoming that he had been robbed of. As pretty a cow ranch as ever a man could wish for. Sam saw it in the summer when the wild roses

were in bloom and the cottonwoods were in leaf. There was a big strawberry patch and fruit trees and a log house with a big screened-in porch around all four sides. Sam had picked some wild flowers and put them on the four graves, while the Stuttering Kid stood guard with a .30-40. But nobody had showed up and they had gone back to where Limpin' George was dead to the world at their hidden camp, the empty jug beside him.

II

TRAINS were held up every six months or so. Always the leader was the unmasked, garrulous Sam Coffee. Always there was a heavy-set man whose hair was thick and gray and who walked with a limp. Each time there was one marked bandit who stuttered. But the other two or three were never the same men. And Sam Coffee invariably took every precaution to prevent any injury to passengers, train crew, express messengers and mail clerks. So far there had never been a single killing. Train crews respected this caution on the part of the outlaw leader and when they were not within hearing of their superiors, spoke well of Sam Coffee. They liked to tell how they had been stuck up by the Sam Coffee gang. They brought home anecdotes about him, to tell and re-tell their families and friends.

The railway company doubled, trebled the big reward for the capture, dead or alive, of Sam Coffee. There were also rewards for the unknown man who stuttered and the heavy-set man who limped.

And in the files under "C" was a stack of notes from Sam Coffee that gave the officials a headache whenever they were examined.

The name of Sam Coffee became almost legendary. About him was woven a glamor made of many tales. In ranchhouses and around round-up camps stories of Sam Coffee were told over and over. Cow hands and owners of cow outfits who had known Sam Coffee were staunchly loyal to their old friendship for the good-natured, hoorawing cowboy who had turned outlaw. Law officers had long since despaired of getting information about the wanted men at the cow camps. And, naturally, Sam and his men never wanted for a change of fresh horses, grub, or cartridges.

Sometimes Sam Coffee was alone when he stopped at some round-up camp or ranch after dark. At other times the Stuttering Kid and Limpin' George were with him. They would stay an hour or two swapping yarns or playing poker, then ride on once more, more than likely forking fresh horses.

Sam Coffee had friends.

Weary-eyed sheriffs and railroad detectives would find a blotted-out trail. They would get no information. And they would get no fresh mounts. Small wonder that they were half-hearted in their pursuit of Sam Coffee. They cussed and swore and rode their leg-weary horses back to town after a week or so of hard riding and slim grub.

The railroad officials were stewing in their own hot broth. They must have cursed the quick-triggered glory-hunter who had murdered Sam Coffee's younger brother. More than once they were tempted to give the outlaw the information he invariably asked for in his notes. But for some reason they never gave out the description of the detective whom Sam Coffee had sworn to kill.

But the news had been whispered by the rustling of the leaves along the outlaw trail that this detective had been assigned to the job of killing or capturing Sam Coffee. Which news brought a grim smile to the wide-lipped mouth of the lanky outlaw.

"I'll be proud to meet the dirty son," he told the Stuttering Kid and Limpin' George. "I got a bullet with his name on it."

SAM sent word to the railroad company that their train would be held up within thirty days and he hoped that their hired killer would be aboard. Within a week they held up the train. But if the killer was on it, he did not show his hand.

True, there was a law officer on the train. He was in the smoking compartment of the Pullman car playing stud poker with several other men. Limpin' George and Sam Coffee had lined them up and taken their guns. Sam took the

law officer's badge for a souvenir. The guns had been tossed out the window into the darkness, for it was after dark when they pulled the job.

"No man kin take my badge and live long," snarled the big peace-officer. "I'll get that badge back."

"Yuh won't be barred from tryin', big feller. What's yore name and where's yore home range?"

"Ever hear uh Shotgun Robbins?" came the snarling answer.

"Shotgun Bob Robbins? Shore thing. You done a few murders since you been hidin' behind that badge. I knowed one uh the boys yuh killed. He had a lot on you, didn't he, Robbins? You and yore cronies that's been doin' some plain an' fancy rustlin' here in Wyoming. If I was a killin' man, I'd kill yuh here." He turned to Limpin' George.

"Guard this snake. I'm thinkin' these fellers with him is part uh his murderin' tribe. If ary one of 'em makes a move, kill this Shotgun gent. He's overdue in hell, anyhow."

"I'd be proud to do the job," came the grim reply. "Me and this murderin' snake has met before, though he don't remember me. I got my own good reasons fer bein' plumb anxious to kill 'im."

"But not unless he makes a move that looks bad, savvy? I'd ruther let him come after this here purty badge."

Sam reached up and pulled the air cord as the signal for his men to act. Also for the train to stop.

Up in the engine cab a veteran engineer turned to the new fireman he was breakin in. "Bet ten dollars it's Sam Coffee. Kid, no fool plays now. We're paid to run this engine, not to fight off train robbers. Sit still and take 'er easy. Light your cigaret."

"I'd like to get a crack at one of 'em with this wrench," muttered the young fireman. "And I could use some of that reward."

"Put that wrench down," growled the old engineer, bringing the train to a grinding halt. "Use that reward, eh? What for? A nice coffin? Lay down that wrench, yuh young half-baked fool, or I'll lay yuh out cold with a crack on the jaw."

The Stuttering Kid swung up into the cab, his gun in his hand.

"Stu-stu-stu—"

"Save your wind," chuckled the grizzled engineer, lifting his hands. "How's tricks, anyhow?"

The Stuttering Kid poked the fireman in the back with his gun.

"Higher, damn yuh, or I'll let yuh have it!"

"Higher," added the engineer, grinning widely. "When this boy forgets to stutter, he's mad and dangerous."

"All right, Kid!" called a voice, and two men swung aboard.

NOW Limpin' George and Sam Coffee climbed into the cab.

"Let's go, mister," grinned Sam. "We're takin' a long ride tonight. About ten miles. Watch for a campfire along the right-of-way and stop just beyond 'er. There's some law on the train and he might take it into his head to interfere with us. How's the missus and kids?"

"Youngest one just gettin' over the measles, Sam."

"Who's the new feller yuh got firin'?"

"He's all right. I told him how to act."

"Turn around to the light, feller," said Sam. "Yuh look kinda familiar. . . . Thought so. Kid, frisk this gent. He's a damned railroad dick. If he wiggles a finger, let 'im have it."

The Stuttering Kid took a heavy automatic from the fireman's hidden shoulder holster and tossed it out the cab window.

"If he acts funny," said Sam grimly, "knock him on the head and th'ow him off. Step on 'er, Joe. I'm thinkin' there's more law aboard that train. But it'll take 'em some time to walk ten miles. And we cleaned Shotgun Bob and his gang uh their artillery. Not so much as a pea-shooter left among 'em."

Sam chuckled.

Some minutes later they sighted the big bonfire. The engineer slowed down.

"Any more law in the mail car or express car?" growled Sam, shoving his gun in the ribs of the badly frightened dick.

"Yes. Two of 'em."

They ground to a halt. Engineer and brakeman were ordered out of the cab and made to stand in the glare of the

headlight, covered by one of the outlaws who was hidden in the shadow.

"No use you boys bein' blowed up," called Sam Coffee to the detectives inside the car. "The dangerous Shotgun Bob and his boys is back yonder without their guns. The feller that was firin' is gentle as a rabbit. We're in a rush tonight, boys. No monkeyin' around. Open up. Open up or we'll blow yuh up. We mean business!"

No reply from inside the cars. Sam gave an order in a low tone. Rifles cracked.

"Shoot low, boys. No killin'."

Now, from inside one of the cars, the groans and curses of a man wounded.

"Open up. Next time we shoot higher! If that don't work we'll use the dynamite. Open them doors!"

The doors opened reluctantly. The men stood there in the lighted cars, arms raised. One of them shot in the leg.

"Work fast, boys," said Sam Coffee. "We got a trail to ride."

NOR was this the only reason why Shotgun Bob Robbins vowed that he'd take Sam Coffee dead, not alive. One of these reasons was a scathing telegram from the railroad official, written in code. It but added to the gun-toting peace-officer's black fury.

A second reason was that perhaps Sam Coffee knew that it was he who had shot John Coffee. Sam would kill him for that if he found out.

Then there was Sam's knowledge of his rustling. Someone had done too much talking. Things were getting tight for the detective-sheriff who was misusing his job as a peace officer to avenge private quarrels and hide his stealing. Sam Coffee's mouth would have to be shut with a dose of lead.

Then there was the voice of that masked outlaw who limped. A voice vaguely familiar as it came from behind the black silk neck-scarf that served as a mask. Somehow it reminded him of a bloody range war in which he had taken part as an imported and highly paid killer. He got so much per dead man and he had made good money at it. His victims had been marked with a cross cut across their foreheads. He still carried the stock knife he had used to do the marking. And that limping outlaw had, by his voiced threat, brought back the memory of those weeks of wanton human slaughter. He had always worked at night, from ambush. But once or twice he had been sighted when the moon was too bright. The memory of this added to his uneasiness of mind.

"We're takin' all three uh them gents back dead," he told his picked killers.

"If ever we ketch up with 'em, Bob."

The telegram from the railroad officials was in his vest pocket. It told him to stay on the trail until he brought in Sam Coffee. There would be no excuse for failure accepted. Otherwise certain support that had kept him out of prison would be withdrawn.

"We'll ketch 'em if we have to foller 'em to hell. Git that fixed in yore minds. Shoot 'em where we ketch 'em."

So, day after day, week after week, they had kept doggedly on the trail of the three train robbers. Each day found Shotgun Bob growing more determined. His temper was sharp and ugly. Sometimes he would go for days without talking, except to snarl and growl profane orders.

The men were getting sullen under the lash of his tongue and the glare of his bloodshot eyes. And Shotgun Bob, seeing this furtive unrest and sulking attitude, rode them all the harder.

ONE night, when they had sat around their campfire in brooding, sulking, scowling silence, the taut, ragged nerves of the killer snapped. He was on his feet with a snarling oath, his handsome face twisted, white with a terrible rage.

"Why don't yuh say somethin'? Where's yore guts? If yuh don't like the game, why don't yuh make a holler? When you was roundsidin' around the ranch on the fightin' pay you wasn't earnin', then things was fine, wasn't they? You was eatin' good grub and drinkin' good whisky and livin' the life uh Riley. Now, when yuh can't set down to restaurant grub and a bottle uh whisky and swing the dance-hall gals around, yuh swell up like a bunch uh buck Injuns. A hell of a pack uh fightin' men yuh are! Yuh scared uh ketchin' up with Sam Coffee and them other two? Scared there'll be shootin' and yuh might

git hurt? Well, if that's what's eatin' on yuh, tuck yore yellow tails between yore laigs and go on home. I'm goin' on. I don't want no pack uh cowardly coyotes trailin' with me. Mebbe some o' yuh'll stick—or are yuh all yaller?"

Two of them jumped to their feet, jerking their guns. Shotgun Bob's right hand moved swiftly. His gun roared twice, with the speed of an automatic. One of the men spun around, pitching sidewise, an outflung arm upsetting the big coffee-pot on the ground beside the fire. The other man, dropping his cocked gun, clawed at his stomach, his face distorted in mortal agony. Deliberately, a snarling grin on his face, Shotgun Bob finished him with a bullet between his staring eyes. Then he faced the others, his smoking gun covering them.

"I got more uh the same kind uh pills if any of yuh are still bothered with the bellyache."

His bloodshot eyes were wicked-looking slits as he stood there in the firelight, two dead men lying there almost at his feet. One man against four, but that one man was a natural killer.

"You win, Bob," said one of the four remaining gunmen.

Shotgun Bob nodded. "Then plant these two. Clean out their pockets and help yourselves to what they got. And if yuh got horse-sense in yore skulls, profit by their example. It's bad luck to bother Shotgun Bob."

They moved on next morning at sunrise. The trail led past an Indian camp. It was a party of Gros Ventres who had been given permission to leave the Reservation to hunt wolves and coyotes. Shotgun Bob found a young buck who spoke a little English. He asked about three white men. The young buck talked to the older men for some minutes, then he pointed toward the northeast.

"They went that way?"

The young buck nodded. "Huh."

"How many days ago?"

The Indian held up two fingers.

A pleased grin spread across Shotgun Bob's face.

THEY picked up the trail easily enough. Five shod horses. Three saddle horses and two pack horses. And the following evening Shotgun Bob sighted the CK line camp at the head of the badlands. White smoke from the chimney of the log cabin rose in the still air. He was looking down upon the camp from a ridge spotted with scrub pine. With his field-glasses he picked out five hobbled horses grazing near the camp. The cabin door was closed. It was just after sundown.

He gave his men orders to dismount. On foot now, moving with every precaution to avoid being seen, they crept down the slope toward the camp on the creek. The evening song of a meadow-lark broke the stillness. The posse of five men surrounding the cabin crept closer on their deadly mission. Now they were within easy range of the cabin. They had their orders, those gunmen who now waited for Shotgun Bob.

"You there, inside the cabin!" he called loudly, harshly. "Open that door and come out, one at a time, with yore hands in the air. Come out or we'll smoke yuh out. We got yuh, Sam Coffee!"

The door opened slowly, cautiously. Shotgun Bob, more than a little astonished at this easy surrender, grinned as he thumbed back the hammer of his Winchester and lined his sights on the cabin doorway.

Single file, three men came out of the cabin, their hands in the air. They stood there, motionless as statues.

With a snarling curse, Shotgun Bob stared at the trio. Stared at the three old Indians in their fringed buckskin.

His first thought as he crouched there, cursing, was to shoot down the three old Indians who had been hired by Sam Coffee to lead the posse to the old CK line camp. Then colder reasoning told him that killing an Indian ward of the Government is a serious offense. He called to his men to hold their fire.

Questioning of the three old bucks brought nothing but non-committal grunts. They showed him a couple of fresh coyote pelts and talked sign language which none of the white men understood. The five horses all were branded with the Government G-dot on the right shoulder.

Disgusted, Shotgun Bob and his four gunmen climbed back up the ridge to where they had left their horses. That night at their camp they sat around in disgruntled silence that was broken only by Shotgun

Bob's occasional bursts of profanity.

"There's a whisky peddler at Rocky Point, Bob," said one of the men. "Mebbyso we kin pick up their sign there."

"Pick up a jag, yuh mean. Well, yuh might git worse ideas, at that. I feel like gittin' drunk. It'll do us all good. I'm follerin' them three gents till we down 'em. Let's git goin'."

III

AT that Indian camp Sam Coffee had run into some old friends. He had given them more money than they would earn by three months' hunting coyotes and wolves. The three old warriors enjoyed the idea of the trick they were to play on the possee.

Sam Coffee, the Stuttering Kid and Limpin' George swung back on the trail, circled the posse, and headed back for the rough country in Wyoming. They rode with a definite purpose in mind.

"The more I think about it," Sam told his two pardners, "the more I'm plumb certain that this Shotgun Bob feller is the snake that killed my brother. I'm a-goin' to make certain. Then I'll hunt him down and kill 'im where I locate 'im."

"I got a claim on that jasper, myself, Sam," said Limpin' George, who was oiling his carbine. "Yo're roddin' the spread and what you say goes. But I'm plumb certain that Shotgun Bob is the same murderin' skunk that killed my three boys in that range war. They was all marked with a cross on their foreheads when they was found and a sheepherder told me he'd seen the murderin' done. He described a feller that shore fits this Shotgun Bob's description. Here's my idee. Why not let up on the railroad a spell and deal misery to this murderin' gent. I know the layouts he's interested in. I know the gamblin' house he owns. Let's clean him out before we hang his hide on the fence. Is that an idee worth thinkin' over or ain't it?"

"Sounds slick," grinned Sam Coffee. "Where's his big gamblin' house and saloon?"

"Just outside the town uh Greasewood. It's called the Ten Mile House. She's a rich layout and a big 'un. Saloon, dance hall, every kind of a gamblin' game."

"Sounds good," replied Sam Coffee. "We're takin' over this here Ten Mile House."

"We'll need more men, Sam."

"How many would yuh say?"

"Six of us kin handle 'er if we play 'er right. I kin git the men we need."

SOME ten nights later, just before dawn, when most of the revelers had gone, five men who had unobtrusively entered the Ten Mile House, slipped on black masks. Each of those five men held a six-shooter in each hand. From the doorway Sam Coffee, unmasked, a gun in each hand, called out in a loud voice:

"Hands up, everybody!"

Two sleepy-eyed guards made a grab for their guns. Two shots roared out as one and the two house guards, each nursing a smashed shoulder, lost all taste for combat.

"It's Sam Coffee!" The name swept the place.

"Now, ladies and gents," said Sam, grinning faintly, "you seen what happened to those two fellers that showed fight. We don't want no killin'. We ain't robbin' nobody. All of yuh line up facin' yonder wall. Keep yore hands in the air. You there, mister proprietor, open the safe and the cash register and dump all the money yuh got into the gunnysack as one uh the boys will give yuh. Make a gun-play and he'll kill yuh. Everybody line up now. Don't push ner crowd, folks! Mister professor, yuh might give us somethin' quick and lively on the pianner."

Gamblers, patrons in various stages of intoxication, dance-hall girls, white-aproned bartenders were lined up with their faces to the wall, hands raised.

"Don't rob a poor workin' gal, handsome," called one of the girls.

"Nobody is bein' robbed but a feller named Shotgun Bob, who owns this joint. Kid, collect what guns the folks got. Don't bother nothin' else. That's the stuff, professor. How'd yuh know that was my favor-ite tune?"

The proprietor, covered by the two guns in the capable hands of Limpin' George, emptied the contents of the safe and cash register into the sack. Now he was lined up with the others.

"Give us a good march, professor. That's the ticket. Now, ladies and gents,

you kin walk out the door and down the road. Don't stop walkin' and don't turn back, because it'll be bad luck. Single file, now. Keep step. One, two, one two. Git goin'!"

Out of the brightly lighted building and down the dusty road that led across a barren alkali flat that showed white in the moonlight. The professor was the last to leave. Sam shoved some crumpled banknotes into his hand.

"I enjoyed that rag yuh played, professor. All right, boys, git busy."

Tables, chairs, gambling outfits were stacked in the middle of the place. Cans of kerosene were brought in from an outside shed and poured around. Rags soaked in the stuff were lighted. In ten minutes the place was a blazing inferno.

The five masked men followed Sam Coffee as he spurred his horse to a lope. They had struck the first blow at Shotgun Bob. Shotgun Bob, who was scouring the badlands of Montana in a heartbreaking hunt for Sam Coffee, the Stuttering Kid and Limpin' George.

When the six riders reached the hills, they halted. They divided the loot in the first gray light of dawn. The three new men scattered, each taking a different route. Sam Coffee and his two companions rode together toward the Double Link ranch that was owned by Shotgun Bob and was said to be the headquarters for his rustler gang.

The chief bandit frowned.

"This 'un," prophesied Sam Coffee, "ain't a-goin' to be so easy."

TRUTH in that prophecy too. The cowboys who worked for the Double Link outfit were tough. Top hands, all of them, and as handy with a gun as they were with rope and running iron.

"Why not burn 'em out?" suggested Limpin' George, who was drinking from a bottle he had taken with him from the burning road house. He was in one of his black brooding moods. "Burn the range, ranch, everything."

"And kill off horses and cattle that never harmed us? Besides spoilin' good range? That ain't my way, George." Sam's grin lost a little of its customary warmth.

"Sam's right," added the Stuttering Kid.

"How else we goin' to wipe 'em out?"

"Know any uh their neighbors?" asked Sam Coffee. "Outfits that the Double Link steals from?"

Limpin' George named over half a dozen outfits. Sam made a mental list of the brands. He rode along for a ways, thinking hard. Then he nodded to himself.

"It's worth a try," he mused aloud.

"Got a scheme?" asked Limpin' George.

"Su-Su-Su-Sam's full of 'em."

"Who's the main ramrod at the Double Link?"

"Feller named Jim Kleats. Crooked as a corkscrew. Do anything fer a dollar er two."

"Even double-cross Shotgun Robbins?"

Limpin' George corked his bottle. "He'd double-cross his own mother if there was six bits in it."

"Then we'll have a medicine talk with this Jim Kleats."

They rode up to the Double Link ranch just before daybreak. Limpin' George and the Stuttering Kid stayed with the horses. Sam Coffee walked from the corral to the cook cabin where a light showed. He found the cook getting breakfast. He was cutting biscuit dough with a can, his back toward the door. Hearing the sound of spurs, he commenced cussing without even looking around.

"Git outa my kitchen and stay out. Ain't I told you boneheads a million times I don't want yuh in here? Git out, now, er I'll reach fer a meat cutter. I'll—"

As Sam Coffee chuckled the rotund cook whirled. His round face was a study. The clouded frown spread to an incredulous grin.

"Sam! Call me every name on the calendar if it ain't Sam!"

"Cranky as ever, yuh danged old biscuit builder. Cranky Dick."

They shook hands. Sam passed a bottle. Then they talked for some minutes and the fat cook licked his lips over the bottle.

"Kleats will be in directly fer his mornin' coffee, Sam. He might play yore game, he might not. Kleats is snaky. But he hates Shotgun Bob and he'll mebbyso set in the game."

JIM KLEATS came in a little later. He was a black-haired, black-eyed man of medium build with a quick way of moving. He was packing a gun.

"Jim," said the cook, "shake hands with Sam Coffee. Sam come here to see yuh."

"See me? What do you want of me, Coffee?" He didn't shake hands for the simple reason that his right hand was on his gun.

"Just a little proposition, Kleats. No need for gun-play. Just a friendly call that might make you some money. Have a drink?"

Jim Kleats nodded. "Money, you said. Money is what I'm after, mister. I'll take my whisky in my coffee. Let's go outside. When I talk business I don't want witnesses."

Outside in the early darkness, Kleats and Sam Coffee talked. Sam did most of the talking while the Double Link ramrod listened.

"Nice stake for you, Kleats. And the men you pick will get good pay. Want it?"

"Supposin' I tell you to go to hell, Coffee?"

"In that case, Kleats, I'll do what I've never yet done to any man—I'll turn you over to the law, that'll hang you for the murder of that Swede sheepman in Dakota. I know all about you, feller. Make a play for yore gun and I'll cripple you for life. Now, Kleats, do you tell me to go anywheres?"

"Who told you about that Dakota deal?"

"Never mind that. I'm askin' you if yo're stringin' yore bets with me or will I cripple you and take you back to South Dakota? You wouldn't like to hang, I reckon."

"No. But I can't pull this without getting in a tight with Shotgun Bob. He's no fool."

"I'll take care uh Shotgun Bob. Yore shippin' point is Sagebrush, ain't it? Well, it won't be when you gather this next herd. You ship out o' Lone Butte. There'll be three trains ordered. Work three outfits. Clean the range. The Double Link cattle is bein' sold to an oufit in Montana. You'll unload at a certain point. There'll be men there to take the cattle. That's all you got to do except hit the trail for South America or some other climate that fits yore clothes. You kin make that gatherment in ten days. The cars will be ordered. All yore men needs to know is that Shotgun Bob Robbins is shippin' this stuff to Montana."

"The price I get is how much, Coffee?"

"Ten thousand dollars when you unload in Montana. I'll be there to pay it."

Kleats nodded.

"Ten thousand dollars. How much for the boys I'll take along?"

SAM considered a moment. "How many men will you need?"

"I got ten men that will go along. The others will be just common hands at regular wages. I'll have to pay them ten men extra."

"Five hundred apiece if they work fast and do the job right."

"That's runnin' into important money, Coffee."

"I got the money." Sam Coffee moved into the light that shone through the kitchen window. "Count this. It's two thousand dollars. Advance. You'll git the balance when you unload the cattle in Montana."

"How do I know we won't git double-crossed?"

"I never double-crossed a man yet. I'm givin' you a chance to make a real stake. If you don't take it, I'll bust that gun arm uh yourn right here and now and us boys will take you on a flyin' trip to Dakota. Are you sittin' in the game, Kleats?"

Jim Kleats, his lean, yellow face mask-like, reached for the money.

"I'm a fool, I suppose, to take a chance on a big steal like this, but you have me where I can't refuse to go through. But if Shotgun Bob gets back here and catches me, I'll be in a bad fix."

"Shotgun Bob," said Sam Coffee, "is huntin' for me in the Montana badlands. He'll not show up here. I'll keep him busy up there. If anybody asks yuh questions, show 'em the telegram that will be at the station at Lone Butte. It will be from Shotgun Bob Robbins tellin' you to ship three train loads of mixed stuff to Grass Basin."

"Grass Basin. Rough country in there. Badlands."

"I'll meet you there. And when the last car of the last train is unloaded, you git paid off. Gather steers and dry cows. Push 'em hard. They'll have plenty uh time to put back the taller you'll knock off 'em."

"It'll clean the Double Link range, Coffee."

"That's the idea, exactly. And git this in yore head, Kleats. You double-cross me and you'll stretch rope. See yuh at Grass Basin."

Sam Coffee left him and walked to the barn. He grinned at the Stuttering Kid and Limpin' George. They mounted and rode away at a long lope. From Cranky Dick, Sam Coffee had gained a certain definite bit of information. Dick had told him how Shotgun Bob had, when drunk, boasted that he had killed Sam Coffee's brother.

IV

THE three outlaws stopped at several neighboring ranches. Always they got there after dark. They stayed an hour, two hours, then rode on. And always the gist of the conversation was this:

That the Double Link outfit had, for years, been stealing the ranchers' cattle. There would be registered in Montana as the Lazy Eight brand. It would be recorded under the name of the Montana Cattle Company, the post office address at Great Falls. The earmark would be the Swallowfork and Underbit, the same as the Double Link earmark. Changing

the Double Link to a Lazy Eight would be no difficult job for skilful brand workers. The cattle, shortly after their unloading at the little tank town of Grass Basin, would be so branded, then scattered in the nearby badlands. The men who would look after the branding would be these Wyoming ranchers who had been donating cattle all these years to the Double Link. To a man they fell in with the plan. They would be on hand to take delivery of the three trainloads of cattle. Later, next fell or next spring, the cattle would be divided among the cowmen who had lost to the Double Link.

Sam Coffee, Limpin' George and the Stuttering Kid headed back for the Montana badlands to head off Shotgun Bob and his men in case that gunslinging gentleman had gotten word about the burning of the Ten Mile House and would now be heading back for his Wyoming ranch.

"I figger," said Sam, "that we'll be meetin' up with 'em before day after tomorrow."

Sam guessed right. The second night they sighted the campfire of Shotgun Bob's posse.

"I reckon," said Limpin' George, breaking a black brooding silence that had held him for the past few days, "that I'll ride over to that camp and kill me a snake."

It was moonlight and in the gray shadow of night Sam Coffee read the expression on the face of Limpin' George. Without speaking, he threw his weight in one stirrup and reaching back, untied his slicker. From it he took a bottle which he handed out. Limpin' George shook his head doggedly.

"I'm killin' me a snake, I tell yuh. Throw away yore damned whisky. I'm killin' me a snake. You kin come along and watch him kick or you kin coyote into the hills. Try to stop me and I'll kill yuh both. Hear me?"

The man's voice was unhurried, toneless. He spoke like a man in a trance. His face was without a trace of anger. He struck the proffered bottle from Sam's hand with a swift, well-aimed blow. It broke on the ground. Sam's grin was but a mechanical expression. He watched the older man with steady eyes.

"All right, George," he said. "Where one goes, we all three go. That was decided when we tied up together. Snake huntin' she is." His forced grin was a silent signal to the Stuttering Kid, whose hand was on his gun. The Stuttering Kid, to whom Sam Coffee was the greatest man alive, had been ready to kill Limpin' George. Limpin' George, whose mind had finally cracked under that eternal hammering of past wrongs and terrible memories.

"Come on, then." Limpin' George

spurred ahead. He rode with a slight stoop to his blocky shoulders, his head thrust forward, his glittering eyes under bushy brows staring straight ahead into the moonlit night.

Sam and the Stuttering Kid were left behind as Limpin' George left them.

"He's committin' sus-sus-suicide, Sam."

"No, he ain't." Sam unbuckled his rope strap and made a small loop. "When I rope him, Kid, git his gun. I got another quart in my slicker. I been afraid he'd crack like this. We'll pour it into him when we git him hog-tied."

THEY spurred their horses to a lope. They were crossing a long flat spotted with greasewood and sagebrush. Sam carried his rope so that it could hardly be seen. Now they were overtaking the dogged, grim-lipped man who was riding to death. Sam's rope shot out, settled across the heavy shoulders, jerked tight.

A growling snarl from Limpin' George as he was jerked out of the saddle and onto the ground. Now the Stuttering Kid flung himself from his horse. A fraction of a moment too late. George's gun roared. Sam felt the burning sting of a bullet that ripped his right arm below the shoulder. The next moment the Stuttering Kid had knocked the gun from George's hand and the two were fighting like wolves. Sam quit his horse now. It took them some minutes to subdue the cursing, growling, snarling man who fought with a terrible punishing ferocity. Then they tied his hands behind his back and put him on his horse.

Limpin' George, regaining his senses, no longer tried to fight. His eyes, glittering terribly, eyed them. Sam's arm was bleeding badly. The bullet had grazed the bone and had torn the muscles. The Stuttering Kid wanted to bandage it.

"No time now, Kid. They heard that shot. She'll be a race. We'll dodge off into them hills to the east where we kin make a stand. Sorry we had to treat yuh rough, George, but the sign ain't right fer snake killin'. We got them cattle to receive at Grass Basin. No hard feelin's, George. You need a drink."

"Damn the drink. Turn me loose. I figgered you was white men, not mangy coyotes. Yuh scared uh that Shotgun thing? I ain't. Turn me loose and I'll kill him like he killed my boys. Turn me loose, damn yuh!"

"Try to quit yore horse, George, and I'll knock yuh on the head again. We'll collect this Shotgun feller's hide when the sign comes right. Keep a-ridin'."

The Stuttering Kid led George's horse. Sam Coffee followed behind. They had to cross a broad stretch of bare alkali that showed like snow in the moonlight. Plain targets.

Shots broke the moonlit silence. Bullets whined around them. Sam dropped back, jerking his carbine.

"Ride like hell, Kid. I'll hold 'em for a spell."

As the Kid, leading George's horse, raced across the bare stretch, Sam Coffee, behind the inadequate screen of the sagebrush that came but a few inches above his stirrups, poured hot lead at the riders who bobbed up and down above the brush. His shots were taking toll. He shoved fresh cartridges in his carbine and kept on shooting. All the time his horse kept lunging and jumping, trying to stampede, and Sam, his right arm half useless, his left handling his gun, held off the men who threw hot lead at him. Then, when the Stuttering Kid and George were safely across the alkali flat, he made a dash for it. His horse on a dead run, his gun spewing fire at the men who tried to follow, he made the shelter. He had escaped without a scratch.

"Keep foggin' along," he told the Stuttering Kid. Limpin' George, snarling, cursing, kept trying to get his arms free.

Half and hour later they pulled up in the broken hills.

"We'll make a stand here. Kid, tie up this arm uh mine. Drink, George, ol' timer?"

There was a queer look in the eyes of Limpin' George as he drank from the proffered bottle. He said nothing. Sam and the Stuttering Kid watched him covertly.

"I'm shore sorry, Sam," said Limpin' George after he had drunk half the bottle, "that I went loco thataway. You shoulda made a good job of it. I might killed yuh, Sam."

"No harm done, George. Feelin' better?"

"Yes. A heap better, Sam."

"Give George back his guns, Kid. It'll take the three of us tuh stop them gents."

FOR a week after that Sam Coffee, the Stuttering Kid and Limpin' George led Shotgun Bob and his men across the badlands. Sam's arm was healing rapidly. The three were bearded, gaunt, hollow eyed. And always Sam and the Stuttering Kid watched Limpin' George. Night times, when they bedded down with a saddle for a pillow and a sweat-dampened saddle blanket for cover, they took turns watching George.

"Time we lit out for Grass Basin," said Sam one morning. "Two of us will lead Shotgun Bob and his men off to'rds the Wyoming line. One of us will see the cattle unloaded and pay off Jim Kleats."

"One man is enough," said Limpin' George, "to lead Shotgun Bob off the trail."

"Two is better," said Sam firmly.

"Unless Kleats has double-crossed us," maintained Limpin' George. "I ain't so sure, Sam, but what Shotgun Bob will be there at the pay-off when them cattle is unloaded. Don't forgit the fact that there's a big price on yore head. And that the law wants me and the Kid likewise. One man kin lead that fool posse a chase."

"George might be right," said the Stuttering Kid. There was no impediment in his speech now and Sam knew that some strong emotion was gripping him to cause that smooth flow of words. Sam nodded.

"We'll draw straws, then."

But Limpin' George shook his head. "Me and you meet the Kleats gent, Sam. The Kid leads the posse off. We'll meet at the Lost Cabin."

"All right, George." Sam turned to the Stuttering Kid. "Lead that posse off, Kid. Meet us at the Lost Cabin a week from tonight."

They parted there. Two days later, at sundown, Limpin' George and Sam Coffee watched the last trainload of cattle trailed away from the Grass Basin yards. They sat on a knoll, hidden by the scrub pines. They had been watching with field-glasses. As the last car was unloaded Sam lowered the glasses and got to his feet.

All the
EARMARKS

of conference killer-dillers aurored that all-star, giant squad. It lacked only a drop of that corny old milk-bottle fluid called 'team spirit'—that was something those glamour boys just didn't have . . .

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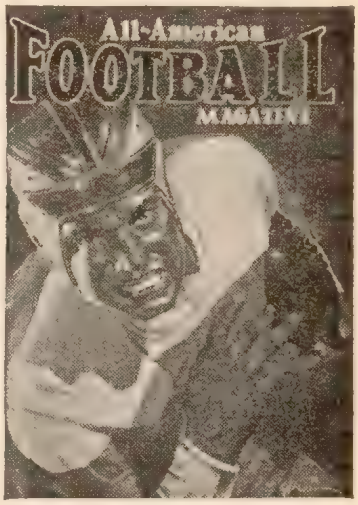

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"The pay-off, George. I spotted Kleats and Shotgun Bob. You was guessin' right."

Limpin' George smiled faintly. "It wasn't exactly guesswork, Sam. I knowed Kleats would try to double-cross us. No use lettin' the Stuttering Kid in for a killin'. Me and you will handle the deal. I wrote Shotgun Bob to that effect. Told him to be there when the cattle was unloaded. That we'd be packin' enough money to make it worth while collectin' our hides. If we lose, Sam, we're payin' for them cattle with the money they'll find on us. If we don't lose, then we'll plant Kleats and Shotgun Bob where we kill 'em. In Shotgun Bob's pockets will be a clean bill of sale for them cattle. Let's ride on down and meet 'em."

"You out-foxed me, George. I figured I was runnin' the game."

"My grudge is older than yours, Sam. Shotgun Bob is my meat."

Together they rode down the knoll. Kleats and Shotgun Bob rode out to meet them. Sam's hand was on his gun. Limpin' George carried his six-shooter in his hand. Now, when but twenty or thirty feet separated them, Limpin' George called out in a harsh, flat-toned voice:

"Come and git 'er!"

GUNS roared. Sam felt the stinging burn of a bullet as it cut his jaw. He saw Shotgun Bob pitch headlong out of his saddle. Saw Jim Kleats double up over his saddle horn, then fall limply as his horse jumped sidewise.

Out of the corner of his eye Sam saw Limpin' George, a terrible smile on his face, slump across his horse's withers, clutching the mane with his left hand. Sam caught him and lowered him to the ground. Limpin' George lay there, bleeding badly, his eyes glazing.

"So-long, Sam. I got 'em both. My idee from the start. I wrote that dirty killer to meet us and fetch along Kleats. That it was them or us and it was the pay-off. I got 'em both, Sam. You and the Stutterin' Kid hit the trail for the Argentine. Yo're both young. I'm old. I got nothin' left to live for. It was my job to kill Shotgun Bob. Help me git over to where he lays. It's all I ask."

Sam helped the dying man negotiate the twenty feet to where Kleats and Shotgun Bob lay dead. Limpin' George opened his pocket-knife. With his last ounce of strength he marked a cross on the forehead of Shotgun Bob. Then, blood oozing from his mouth, he lay back on the ground. His groping hand found Sam's.

"Take care uh the Stuttering Kid, Sam. I'm goin' now. I got friends among them cowboys that'll bury me. So-long, Sam. Good luck. I'm sorry I shot you in the shoulder the other day. But I had 'er made to kill that snake and I was scared he wouldn't show up—until I found a note he left for me on the trail. He knowed that if him and Kleats didn't meet me, I'd tell what I knowed and git 'em hung. Give the Stuttering Kid my—"

He lay there, dead. Sam wiped the blood from the dead man's face, then mounted his horse and rode away, bearing Limping George's money.

A week later he met the Stuttering Kid at the Lost Cabin. The Kid asked no questions. Only after they had finished supper and were smoking beside the campfire did Sam Coffee speak.

"Limpin' George got Kleats and Shotgun Bob. He wanted it thataway. Didn't want me or you to do any killin'. He told me to kinda look after you, Kid. And so, tomorrow mornin' you and me is hittin' the trail for a new range. We'll begin all over. We'll live honest. That's the way Limpin' George'd want it to turn out, savvy?"

The Stuttering Kid swallowed a lump that was choking him. His eyes were misty with unshed tears.

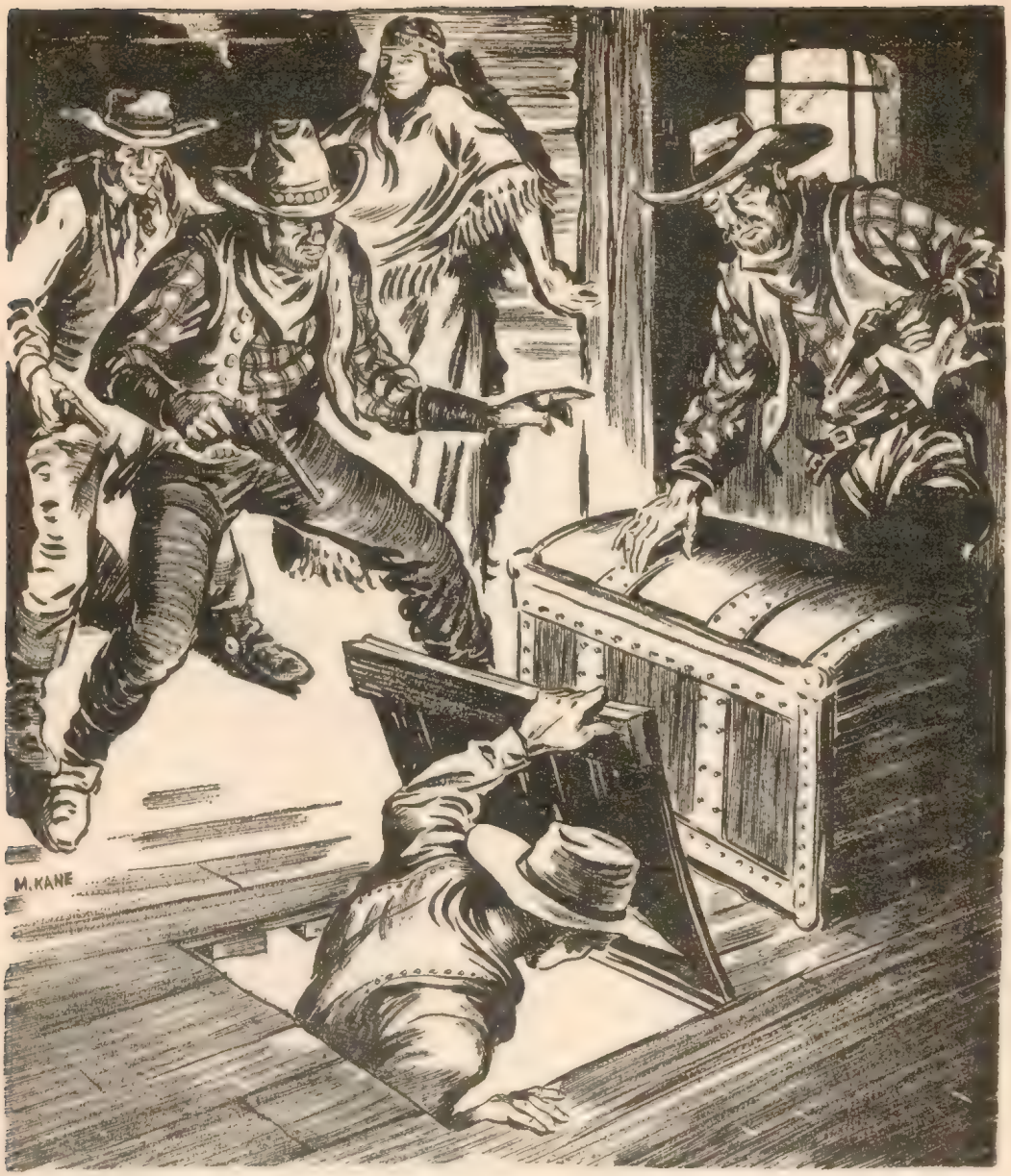
"I su-su-savvy, Sam."

Sam Coffee laid his hand on the Kid's shoulder.

"Sing, Kid. Sing *The Cowboy's Lament*. That was Limpin' George's favorite."

In due time a letter reached the office of the railroad president. It was a crudely written message, scrawled in indelible pencil.

"Go ahead and run yore dam tranes," it read. "Me and you is quits. I ain't pesterin' you no more. I am where you can't never git me so don't try. Yores truly. Sam Coffee."



A mournful song rose from the black pit. The tip of a hat came after it.

AS GOOD AS A GUN

BY T. W. FORD

Black Bill Carew was dead. None knew that better than Devil Delaney, for the Devil had fired the shot. . . . But a ghost sang in the night at the outlaw hideout.

BLACK BILL CAREW was dead! Delaney knew that. Hadn't he shot him himself? But as he met the quiet eyes of the sallow-faced hombre atop the piebald mare, Delaney wet his lips. One of his corded hands strayed to the gun butt jutting from his hip. With a fixed grin, he stuck out his hand and said, "howdy."

The hombre atop the mare nodded.

With a cat-like ease, he slid from the double-rig hull. "You're Delaney, the boss?"

Towering over him, a domineering giant of a man, Delaney nodded.

"Sure. 'Devil' Delaney. I'm yer friend, too. Seein' as how yer Black Bill's brother. Bill use tuh swear by me." He found something in that to chuckle at. But his hand never moved far from his gun belt.

The lean, sort of pallid hombre nodded as if he were well aware of all that.

"I'm Whitey Carew, Black Bill's brother." He pulled off his rusty sombrero to bat off the trail dust.

Devil Delaney and his two men breathed freely again. Delaney himself grinned wide and crookedly. His hat came off, and a head of stringy, tow-colored hair was revealed. Until he had taken that hat off, the ranny had looked almighty like Black Bill himself. Of course, Black Bill was dead. They all knew that; Delaney best of all.

But the tow head settled things. Black Bill's own had been a shock of pit black. Devil's hand dropped away from his hip and he didn't take the trouble to soften his voice like he had before. When the Devil talked out loud and from the corner of his mouth, it meant he had nothing against a hombre—yet.

"Glad tuh know yuh, Whitey. Plumb sorry 'bout Black Bill. Shake hands with Red McPhail an' Charlie the breed." Delaney waved airily. "Both of 'em good friends uh Bill."

The stranger nodded and shook hands limply with the horse-jawed hombre who was McPhail and the stooped, smiling breed.

"Listen," Whitey Carew told them, "I came tuh kill the man what killed Bill." He stared straight at Delaney as he spoke.

The Devil nodded quickly.

"Sure, we knowed that when we got the note yuh sent. Sure, yuh want tuh kill the snake. Bill was a good gent. I know. That—"

Whitey Carew interrupted Delaney, coldly.

"Who did it?"

Something in Carew's eyes brought a flush to Delaney's features.

"Don't figger I did, do yuh?" he asked, half bantering.

Whitey Carew never moved a muscle. "If yuh did," and his fingers grew white and tense as they rested on the saddle horn above him, "I'd—kill—*yuh* . . ."

Delaney's eyes narrowed. For an instant, he was ready to snap back at this swellheaded ranny. Then he thought better of it. "An' I wouldn't blame yuh if yuh did—if I did it," he finally replied placatingly. "Sure. But—"

"Who did?" Whitey Carew's face seemed a few inches nearer Delaney.

Delaney met the other's eyes without flinching. Then he called over his shoulder: "Git the hosses, Charlie. We'll take the kid up to the camp. She's a long story, Whitey," he explained as they mounted.

Fearlessly, Delaney swung to the lead of the column as they filed across the mud flat below the splintered sycamore where they had made the rendezvous to meet Black Bill Carew's brother. If Whitey Carew had a suspicion as to who killed Bill—well, the Devil might stop a slug in the back. But Devil Delaney rode without fear.

THERE were few men, if any, who would have cared to cross guns with this swaggering, arrogant outlaw. God had given Delaney few things; life had given him less. But there was one talent Delaney did possess, and that was a sheer wizardry for pulling his gun and killing before it seemed to be free of its holster. Besides that talent, Delaney had two men at his back, Red McPhail and the breed.

When Delaney died at the hands of another, that too would be their death warrant. The Devil had promised them that; said something about a paper he had left someplace about how McPhail was wanted for manslaughter in Montana and the breed for patricide. So Delaney rode in the van and chatted lightly, never fearing.

"Yuh know—Bill an' us—we was longriders, Whitey," he called over his shoulder as they wound up the faint, rough trail.

"Yeah," Whitey Carew replied slowly. "Bill told me—once."

"Well, we was. Stuck up a few stages.

Never did no killing, though. None of us. Least of all, Bill. *Sabe?* We was forkin' the owl hoot trail. *Sabe?* An' there was uh ornery depitty sheriff. A tough bird, wasn't he boys? Yeah, dirty, double-crossing snake. He an' Bill—Well, kid, I'll let yuh hear it from the only witness. She sees it all an' tells me an' the boys when we rides home. Yuh see? You'll hear how Bill got his—from her."

"Yeah?"

Devil Delaney twisted in the saddle. There was a half-sensed, unspoken challenge in every word of this quiet Whitey Carew's. Their horses were splashing slowly down the creek bed. A half mile and they turned, rode through a heavy thicket that came right to the sluggish water's edge, trotted over a bosky and turned south into a narrow grassy valley that wound deeper into the hills. The Devil dropped back beside the stranger. He noticed that the kid wore but one gun, and that stuck clumsily inside the waistband of his jumper. Not a gunman, evidently.

The Devil's eyes slitted. "A hard place tuh find," he mentioned. "Call this the Lost Coyote Country hereabouts. Mighty few jaspers'd ever find their way intuh our hideout."

"That so," Carew replied.

"Yep. An' a heap fewer'd ever find their way out again." Delaney rode a bit nearer the kid. "Damn few—if any." There seemed to be a threat in his words.

They cut off into a blind gulch. Their horses began panting under the strain of the steady climb. The ground became rougher and rockier as they climbed. The trail became a mere shelf along a precipitous crag, dipped into a boulder strewn hollow, rode over a short mesa that breathed desolation and then wound around a barren swamp.

As they were threading their way through a narrow pass, barely room enough for a horse to pass, under overhanging cliffs, the Devil spoke to the kid again.

"Yeah—a hairpin might git in—an' he might *start* out. But he could never find this back-trail." Delaney paused. "I mean—me an' Bill an' the boys had a good hangout."

Devil Delaney was thinking. If this ranny from down Texas way should suspect how Bill got his . . . if he should suspect that he, the Devil, had blown the back of his head off and then dropped the body into the creek . . . Devil Delaney's mouth curled.

BLACK BILL had been asking for it. That danged deputy had ridden right into the place. Of course, he had been wounded and he sagged blindly from the saddle. But if he had ever ridden out again, after seeing their hangout. Delaney could remember how he had grabbed up a freshly-oiled Winchester and stuck it through the cracked shutter.

Then Black Bill, the fool, had leaped on his back and dragged him away from the window. He had torn the gun from his hands and told Devil Delaney he wasn't going to shoot down that half-dead lawman out there. As if anybody was telling the Devil who he was or wasn't going to shoot!

They had fought then, he, the Devil, and that soft-hearted white-livered skunk, Black Bill Carew. Red and the breed and the old squaw had crouched against the wall. Nobody had wanted to fire a shot with that wounded deputy outside anyway. And Black Bill had locked the Devil's gun arm so he could not cut loose with that life-withering draw of his.

Back and forth across the shack on stilts they had battled. Then Red McPhail's boot had shot out. Black Bill had tripped, faltered. And in that moment, the Devil had swung a stool and crashed it over Black Bill Carew's head. They had all turned back to the shuttered windows to take care of that curious deputy.

A moment later there had been a frightened squawk from the squaw. Delaney had pivoted around to see Black Bill, still prone and crushed, but with his Colts covering them unwaveringly. The Devil had wrenched at his gun. Black Bill had thumbed the hammer.

The hollow click of an empty shell had told Devil Delaney he was still alive. And his own gun had crashed thunderously through the stillness, flooding the tiny room with smoke. Still snarling, the Devil had bent an instant to make sure the bullet had pierced the skull. But there had

been no doubt; Black Bill Carew was dead.

Without hesitating, the Devil had pushed the gore-covered body aside, kicked up the trap door and dropped it through into the swift-flowing stream. That had finished that. He could still remember the squaw croaking and crossing herself. The last thing to vanish through the trap was Bill's bullet-scarred arm, stuck aloft, knotted-fisted, like a threat. Then he was gone. The squaw always said as how Bill's eyes were still opened when he dropped.

Devil Delaney's big shoulders shook as he chuckled. He looked back quickly. Whitey Carew was almost at his stirrup. For a moment, they locked eyes. The kid did look like Bill, except for that distinct difference in their hair. Devil Delaney chuckled again.

"This hoss—she gives me the laugh. Always starts prancin' sorta—when we git near the camp. When we rides out—she's got a limp . . . Funny."

"Yeah," said Whitey Carew.

The Devil looked full into Carew's face, scowling a little. "I said it was funny," he repeated. Nobody dared to draw against the Devil. Why should he worry?

"There's the camp," Charlie the breed cried, riding beside them, mouth working nervously. "Wonder what the old woman's got fer dinner."

THE hangout was a paintless, sagging thing perched on stilts. A fast-flowing creek streamed out of the hills beneath it. To all appearances, it was deserted. Delaney and the boys wanted it to look that way. A narrow, tortuous trail wound across a swamp to it. The moss-covered shutters sagged precariously across the windows. No smoke rose from the crude chimney.

"Got a chimney out the back, on the water side," Red McPhail explained as he led Whitey Carew to the door. "Pretty slick, huh?"

They dismounted.

Delaney himself and the breed were leading the horses to the shed buried in the brush at the water's edge. The breed slipped off the saddles and waited while the ponies rolled with relief in the dust. Delaney stepped close to Carew's piebald mare.

"Spade-in-a-Circle," he mentioned, catching the brand. "Hum-m. Didn't know they had that in Texas. Quite a few years since I rustled a doggie down there. He was wearin' Johnston spurs. Did yuh see that? Let's see that hull."

"Listen, boss," the breed began in his whining tone. "What did yuh want tuh bring him here fer? If that hairpin gets—"

"Shut up! Yuh got the nerve of a boogered-down polecat. Who's goin' tuh tell him? Did yuh git things straight with the old woman?"

Charlie the breed nodded nervously as he shuffled about the shed. "Yeah—she knows what tuh say."

Delaney dropped the hull he had been studying.

"All right. If she tells her story right—things'll be fixed. If she don't—" He fixed the breed with his eyes and tapped his gun significantly. "This'll herd yuh right intuh the Big House."

The breed nodded rapidly as he worked to the open side of the shed. "She knows what tuh say. She'll tell it right. The old woman don't want tuh see me behind the bars, boss. But if that Whitey Carew finds out—"

Delaney grabbed the shaky breed by the shoulder.

"Listen! Yuh want that ornery McCullom depitty outa the way, don't yuh? Well, that's what we got this kid here fer. He's goin' tuh be orey-eyed an' loco when he finds out how Black Bill got it—leastwise, when he hears how yer old woman says he got it. *Sabe?* I know them Texans. He'll fog it down and call that McCullom depitty an' cripple him if he don't git him. Then we're fixed. If the depitty gits him in the job—well that ain't our business. That's what I let the kid come here fer. Now yuh see?"

Charlie the breed nodded. "Sure, boss . . . But he looks like that brother uh hisn'n a heap. An' if—"

"Shut up an' come along!" Delaney commanded low, cuffing him under the jaw.

The four of them were sitting around the rickety table in the shack on stilts.

"Some slick joint, eh?" Delaney spoke to Whitey Carew. "They might trap us here. But we'd give 'em the laugh—any-

way. Got a trap door right over the water," he pointed to the center of the floor, "an' a boat below. We could slip out even when they was poundin' on the front door." He paused. "Maybe yuh don't like this outlaw game, kid?" Delaney's eyes narrowed.

With that blond hair, Whitey Carew seemed sort of young. He was a bit thinner and paler than Black Bill, his brother, had been. But there was something about the kid, something about his eyes and his quick, sure movements that reminded a hombre of Bill. And Bill had been a good man—until he got in the way. Delaney thought; maybe he could use the kid too—for a while. Young Carew's reply made him certain of it.

"Don't know," Carew the Texan came back. "A heap better than nursin' cows an' eatin' beans fer forty a month. An' any game that was good enuff fer Bill—she suits me."

Delaney reached over and clapped him heartily on the back. Dropped his fingers down his left shoulder, too, as he finished. Just to make sure the ranny didn't tote a hide-out. The Devil liked to know what he was up against. "Have a drink?" And he shoved the bottle over the table.

Whitey Carew downed a tin mug full without a flicker and lit a querley.

"Now—who killed Bill?" His eyes were boring into Delaney himself, and those eyes had a chill, glazed beam.

Delaney met his glance without stirring.

"Mom," he called to the aged squaw tending the cracked, sheet-iron stove in the corner. "Come here!"

The old crone tottered over, drawing her bedraggled shawl closer over her shoulders as if it were cold. Her beady eyes rested on Delaney, ran furtively to her son, the breed, then with an obvious effort met Whitey Carew's. She held them there, seeming to shrink within her tattered shawl.

Devil Delaney emptied his tin cup, then let his hand fall below the table. "Tell him, Mom. He's Bill's brother. Tell him how Bill got—killed." Under the table, he kicked the gaping breed sharply. "Go ahead, Mom."

The Indian crone crossed herself hurriedly. In a quavering whisper, she ran her words off hurriedly, in a sing-song drone.

"The boys—they all away. Black Beel—he here. *Sabe?* Come law fella. Ride horse. He look very wounded bad. *Sabe?* He have white rag. He wave. Beel—he say he go out help law fella. I say no. Beel—he go. Law fella see Beel and pull gun. He shoot. Beel fall dead." The drone of the squaw paused.

"Where did yuh bury him?" Whitey Carew said quietly, half rising.

"Wait a minute, kid. Go ahead, Mom." Delaney sat back again. Mom was playing her part good. But his hand lay across his holster nevertheless.

The squaw began again, almost as if she were reciting something. "Law fella get off saddle. Pick up Beel and drop him in water." She pointed downward toward the stream that gurgled softly around the stilt piles beneath them. "Then come to door—law fella. He say—me McCullom. Tell dirty coyotes I get rest of them." The woman stopped abruptly, her eyes still fastened on Whitey Carew as if by hypnotic fascination.

"That's all, Mom," Delaney said gruffly. "Yuh, see, kid—that lousy depitty, McCullom, did it. Tricked him an' killed him. Now—" He kicked the breed as he noted his eyes fastened on the trap door of the shack, as if waiting for some one to rise out of it.

The clear, chill words of young Carew cut into Delaney's talk. His eyes rested with the weight of iron on the Devil himself. "I'll get the hombre that got Bill."

Delaney nodded affably.

"Sure. Sure, kid. We're right with yuh. Only if McCullom sees us—why—. Well, yuh *sabe*. But we're right back uh yuh."

Whitey Carew rose. "I'll kill Bill's killer," he said, as if not hearing the Devil.

UNDER a moon that skulked along the crest of the gloomy ridges, Whitey Carew rode away from the camp that night. Just going down to Welton and scout around to have a look at that McCullom fella, he told the gang.

Delaney patted him heavily on the back. "That's the stuff, kid. Yuh Texans! I know. Give him a bellyful uh lead an'—"

But Carew shook his head in the soft darkness.

"No. I want tuh see this ranny. Then I'll git him. But I don't aim tuh stretch fer it. I'll give him what yuh said he give Bill. But I ain't no fool."

Devil Delaney nodded his admiration in the dark. This ranny had a heap more sense than his hot-headed brother. "When yuh finish the job, kid, there's a place fer yuh with the bunch."

"When I kill my brother's killer—" the kid paused.

"Yeah," Delaney affirmed.

Carew went on, unheeding.

"*Then,* maybe yuh won't want me ridin' with yuh." And the slender Whitey Carew rode off into the night, forking Delaney's own horse which knew the trail like a book.

Devil Delaney whistled softly as he turned back to the shack on stilts.

"Plenty uh nerve, that ranny." But if the Devil knew, that later that night, Whitey Carew had sat in the peace officer's office at Welton and talked gravely with a deputy known as McCullom, he might have thought the kid had a little too much nerve.

RED McPHAIL consulted his watch. Four A.M. "The kid ought tuh be gittin' back soon." He shifted his plug of tobacco to the other side of his jaw. "That is, ef he ain't pullin' the double-cross on us—"

The Devil kicked back his chair in a rage. "A double-cross! How the hell can he?"

McPhail chewed on, unperturbed by the outburst from the Devil. "Supposin' he got a-talkin' with McCullom hisself. McCullom might tell him it ain't so, he never bumped off Bill—"

"Yeah," Delaney took it up for him, "an' he an' McCullom might lead a posse in here tuh blow us out. An' they'd haf tuh come across the swamp, on that trail, ridin' one by one. An' we got three Winchesters here besides two six-guns a-piece. An'," Delaney's voice was high with sarcasm, "if we couldn't pick the dratted fools off easy, we ought tuh stretch rope fer it. Uh course, he an' Mister McCullom er goin' tuh squat down an' parley a heap. This kid's goin' tuh buy drinks fer the bird what he thinks killed Bill an' he's goin' tuh talk nice. Yuh dang fool, I know them Texans! That kid means business! I don't like his eyes much myself. Tough as rawhides, Whitey Carew. Them eyes—"

"Mebbe they reminds yuh uh Bill's eyes," McPhail suggested coldly. "He had cold eyes like that. Only time they was ever soft was when he was singin' 'bout them doggies he left back in Texas."

"He won't be doin' much singin' where he is now," Delaney chuckled coldly.

The old squaw in the corner stirred. "The eyes — they were open — very wide —when he went down the hole."

The Devil swore. "Yuh don't think I could take the trouble tuh lay pennies on them for him, do yuh!"

The squaw's son, the breed, Charlie squirmed in his chair. "But he might lead that depitty in, an' some day when we comes back 'cross the swamp trail ourselves, that depitty'd be waitin' here fer us."

The Devil very quietly shoved the bottle over the table to the breed.

"Take a swig, Charlie. Yuh ain't got any guts—but it'll warm up the place they're supposed tuh be. Me, I'm Devil Delaney. Don't fergit that, boys. We got the kid here tuh do a job we couldn't pull. He'll git that danged McCullom outa the way. If he should git some wise—remember—I'm Devil Delaney. An' there ain't a livin' son of a woman on this earth what can stand up against my guns! The dead I ain't worryin' 'bout." He splashed his tin cup full of the red liquor.

"That's right," McPhail admitted, rolling a querley.

The breed smacked his lips after the liquor. "Sure, boss. Yuh kin give the best of 'em a start."

IT was quiet after the scratch of McPhail's match, except for the purl of water beneath the shack. A horned owl hooted far back in the hills someplace. They could hear the ponies stomping down in the horse shed.

"McPhail said: "An' even if they git a lawman planted in here, when we was out, the old woman jus' opens the slide to the top chimney, an' when we see the smoke comin' outa the roof, we know."

He chuckled mirthlessly and pulled out his watch again. "Almost four thir—" The watch hit the table top with a dull thud. McPhail's empty fingers froze.

"What was that?"

No one knew who said it. But they all knew why. Faintly, thinly, a song floated on the wafting night breeze. It was a familiar song and the discordant, tuneless notes of the singer were familiar. It came stronger—seemingly from below.

"Lie down, little dogies, lie—"

It was slow, haunting, doleful. The breed leaped noiselessly away from the table. Over in the corner, the old squaw was crossing herself time and again. McPhail sat frozen. The Devil found his gun but his fingers fumbled twice. Then it came again:

"Lie down, little dogies, lie down-n-n . . ."

The breed crouched in a corner, whining curses. McPhail seemed frozen to stone, unmoving, eyes dead. The Devil yanked his gun and flung away from the table. Grabbing the lantern he kicked open the trap door and poked the gun nose in the ray of light that reached to the black water.

There was nothing there. And there was no song now, either. Breathing hard, he slammed down the trap and faced the room. Slowly he holstered his gun.

"Listen yuh yella coyotes! Black Bill's dead! Yuh saw me bore him through the brains. Even if he wasn't quite dead, he could uh never lived in that water. Have a drink an' git some nerve."

McPhail reached for the bottle with grim determination. The breed crept from the corner, jabbing his Bowie back into his shirt.

"Lie down, little dogies—"

The Devil flung around the room, gun hammer cocked. Then he swore crazily as he leaped into the corner and crashed the stool from under the old squaw.

"So it was yuh, eh? You—"

She crept off to her bed in the rafters. McPhail set his mug down.

"It wasn't her afore. I was lookin' right at her. An' her lips weren't moving, boss."

The Devil spat and took a drink. Nobody slept that night.

THE sun was crowning the first peak to the east when Whitey Carew rode across the treacherous path that ran through the swamp. The three pair of eyes watched him from the shack. He came alone. After putting Delaney's horse in the shed, he dragged himself wearily to the shack. Delaney himself watched him with narrow, furtive eyes. Maybe . . .

"I got the dope," young Carew proclaimed, as he sat down. His cold, appraising eyes ran over them, singly, "There's a shipment comin' in on the stage tuh-morrow night."

"Stage don't run then," Delaney said simply.

"Special shipment, Delaney, I should have told you. Heard all 'bout it from McCullom."

"McCullom?" the other three gasped.

"Yeah, told him I wore a badge under Hack Wilson down Bitter Creek way a few years back. So—"

"Did yuh?" Delaney asked softly.

Whitey Carew grinned for the first time since meeting those men. "Now, listen, if yuh think I look like one of them dry-gulchin', double-crossing' lawmen—" he grinned. "Got McCullom tuh talkin'. Here's how she lies. The stage is makin' a special run—at night. She's carryin' 'bout twelve thousand." Three pair of eyes widened greedily.

"But yuh'd never git it," Carew ran on. "McCullom was tellin' me—she's be-in' shipped in in a big case uh pay dirt. Yuh might pick it up an' figger it's stuff tuh be assayed. But inside—inside is the twelve thousand. *Sabe?"*

Delaney nodded, prepared to take command.

"A chest of pay dirt, eh. But the dinero is inside. Easy. Stick up the stage, smash open the chest—an' we're fixed. Now—"

But Whitey Carew was shaking his head negatively. "No, she ain't easy, Delaney. That chest has the lock on the inside, so yuh can't break it. She's iron bound, too. An' McCullom himself is meeting the stage directly she hits the Lost Coyote country. He carries the keys tuh the chest—tuh take out the dinero an' ship it from Welton."

Delaney smashed the table with his fist. "That danged—"

"Wait a minute." Whitey Carew bent

closer to the three. "We'll stick up the stage afore she hits the Coyote hills an—"

"With a driver an' guard on the box?"

"Leave that tuh me," Carew replied. "We'll take a pack horse with us. You boys 'll snake off the chest an' haul her up here. I'll ride on with that stage an' *get* McCullom." His lips flared back and there was a significant emphasis on the "get." "Then I'll join yuh with the key."

Delaney stood up, grinning widely.

"I like yer style, kid. Yuh got brains an' nerve. She sounds slick. Yuh'll git yer crack at McCullom, too."

Red McPhail rose also. "Say, Whitey," he said offhandedly, "yuh don't sing, do yuh?"

The eyes of the three fixed on the kid, trying not to betray their interest. Whitey grinned for the second time. "Sure I sing. Ever hear 'The Dyin' Hobo'? No? Here goes."

With the three poised like cats, Whitey Carew pierced the room with a shrill, nasal, ear-stinging voice.

"In the sweatin' box-car
The dyin' hobo lay
His pal was—"

Devil Delaney was laughing and swearing. "Shut up, yuh danged owl. Yuh want tuh drive us loco." Whitey Carew stopped with a disappointed look, not quite understanding apparently the relief of the other three.

"Better roll in an' git some shuteye," the Devil reminded them.

A COYOTE howled someplace across the mesa. A horse shifted uneasily. Three men, masked with neckerchiefs, sat their saddles close in the scrub. Just ahead, a slender, unmasked figure peered up the trail to the left. Devil Delaney studied the slitted eyes, the straight jaw, finding a marked resemblance to Black Bill. And this brother of Bill's possessed all the dead man's audacity with a cunning Bill himself never knew.

The Devil grinned over his hand-masked cigaret. The rattle of steel-rimmed wheels over the rocky bottom of the dry gulch reached them. Guns were eased from holsters. McPhail spat. Out of the moonless wall of night, the Welton stage dashed, eight span team stretching along dusty trail.

"Now!" Whitey Carew whispered. He edged his piebald mare out of the shadow of the brush. The stage hurled by, striking sparks from the loose rocks. Carew's mare doubled and sprang right into its shadow upon the trail.

The mare doubled twice more, then was riderless. For Whitey Carew had hit the dust on the run, leaped lithely and was firmly seated on the baggage rack of the stage itself. As the Devil signaled his men after him, he saw the agile kid squirm over the roof of the jolting stage. Slick work, the Devil thought as he spurred his pony down the trail.

Whitey Carew jammed his two guns into the backs of the mule skinner and the guard at his side on the box.

"She's me, boys," he grunted. "Pull her up!"

The stage rumbled to a creaking halt. The Devil and his men jerked up by its side in a cloud of dust. McPhail slashed the bonds of the heavy chest on the rack in the rear. It was off, dumped roughly into the middle of the trail. Whitey Carew dropped to the ground beside it, nodded approval, then stepped to the door.

"Yuh buzzards," he cried to the men one the box. "One squawk outa yuh an' yuh'll draw a black ace—free." He turned to Delaney. "I'll meet Mister McCullom. See yuh later." Then he had slipped inside."

The stage rattled off down the road. Delaney and the other two hoisted the heavy, steel-bound chest onto the pack horse. Still smiling, Delaney led the little cavalcade back to its hideout in the hills of the Lost Coyote country. And when they threaded the tortuous path through the morass of quicksand, Devil Delaney was still smiling.

THEY dragged the chest into the shack on the stilts. It was heavy and apparently solidly filled. This would be the pay dirt disguising the dinero inside it. Without a glance for the squaw mumbling in the corner, Devil Delaney threw himself into a chair with evident satisfaction.

Charlie the breed smiled obsequiously. "Yer smart, boss. No one kin—" The three men in the room ceased breathing.

"Lie down little dogies, lie down!
Lie down, little dogies—"

The three men were on their feet. It was coming closer. And closer. It seemed to be rising from the water below their feet. The water that gurgled suckingly around the stilt-like piles. The water that had swallowed Black Bill Carew's body.

"—lie down!"

It was just below their feet. With a crashing oath, Devil Delaney swung to his feet and jabbed his gun barrel before him. The table tottered, shaking the lamp that flickered on the point of going out. Charlie the breed skulked to the door, jerking it open.

"Git away from there!" Delaney told him with that curious calm voice that meant deadly anger.

The breed whined and drew away from the half open door. The lamp flickered lower in the wind. McPhail was against the wall, tall and tense, hands open and hooked before him as if he were trying to push something away. He never stirred a finger toward his guns. The Devil stamped to the trap door, as if trying to convince himself of his own actuality by the force of his feet. Bending, with his gun set, he yanked it open.

His breath whistled sharply. Gun sagging, eyes transfixed on that hole over the water, he backed away, step by step, slowly, agonizingly.

"Lie down, little dogies, lie down."

It came out of that black pit now. The tip of a hat came after it. Then a man's face. . . . And that man was Black Bill Carew!

The ghost of Black Bill Carew had come home! Come home still bleeding from the death wound that Delaney had administered!

Inch by inch, he turned, facing them each a moment that was to them an agonizing eternity. His arm lifted, the sleeve of his checked shirt falling back to reveal the red sear of a bullet scar.

"Lie down, little dogies, lie down . . ."

He hummed it, his voice trailing off as he faced the Devil himself. Delaney stood like a man whose feet were rooted.

"Howdy, Devil! . . ." There he stood, nodding, smiling a little, Black Bill Carew, his death wound still bleeding! Black Bill Carew who had been shot dead by Delaney himself! Black Bill risen out of the murky waters that had swallowed him!

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"My God! I can't stand it no longer, Devil! You killed him!" The breed was screeching, face writhing horribly as he sought to tear out the words.

The breed's voice seemed to rip the spell. Devil Delaney knew he faced a dead man. Had'nt he killed him, himself? Hadn't he shoved the corpse into those broiling black waters? But . . .

The Devil sneered.

"Howdy, Black Bill! So yer back!" Delaney's voice was terribly, terribly quiet, as it was when he was mad or in danger. His words came brokenly as his broken arrogance toppled on the brink of madness. "Yer back!" he screamed at the unspeaking ghost.

The Devil stepped forward, slowly.

"I killed yuh once. Over that lousy depitty, too."

The colorless lips of Black Bill Carew parted. His voice was throaty as if deep from the grave. "Yuh can't kill me—no more—Devil!"

The Devil jutted his body forward, twisting. His lips frothed slightly. His once domineering eyes gleamed with insane desperation. Devil Delaney was almost insane.

"Yes I can! Yes I can!" he screamed. "Mebbe yuh know I bumped off that lousy depitty, too! Yuh tried tuh stop me. Sure I killed him! An' I'm killin' yuh again —Black Bill!" His gun shot up. The hammer cocked as the Devil hissed through his teeth.

A single Colt shot rang through the room. The Devil leaped. His gun hit the floor. Then he was cowering before Black Bill's ghost as he tore at his fractured wrist.

"Put 'em up, gents!" a calm voice commended.

BLACK BILL CAREW struck off his hat, grinning, to reveal a tow-colored thatch of hair. A man stepped out of the chest the Devil and his boys had dragged from the stage. The man's Colts circled slowly. It was McCullom, the deputy sheriff.

Devil Delaney shrieked impotent rage. "What the devil! Yer Whitey Carew! Yuh ain't Black Bill—"

The hombre who had called himself "Whitey Carew" smiled and shook his head. "No, Devil, I'm Black Bill. Yuh see my scar. There is no Whitey Carew. Never had no brother. I told yuh that once, afore yuh tried tuh shoot me."

"But I did shoot yuh, Bill!" Delaney cried. "Killed yuh—threw yuh intuh that water an'—"

"There's a crosspiece down there between those stilts, Devil. I opened my eyes, lying across it, the next morning. Then I slipped ashore—an' got away."

The breed cringed in the center of the room. "Black Bill—had black hair."

"Sure I did, Charlie," Black Bill agreed. "An' I will agin when this danged peroxide dye grows out. I'm thinner than I was, too. Devil's shot cut a pretty gash in my scalp. Lost a heap of blood." He shoved some of his thick locks aside to show them the bullet furrow.

Devil Delaney stumbled to the table and reached for the bottle. "I didn't mean it, Bill. Honest. We'll forgit it, Bill." He paused, measuring the man he thought dead with piggish eyes. "Yuh ain't got nothing on me nohow—yuh ner that depitty!"

McCullom took a hand. "Keep 'em up, Delaney. Yer goin' tuh stretch rope!"

"Fer what?" Delaney yelled.

"Fer killin' a deputy sheriff on your own admission, Devil," Black Bill put in. "On your own admission a few moments ago. I tried to stop you that time. You tried to kill me. I came back. I couldn't whip you with a gun—square. So I fixed it up with McCullom here. Yuh sure toted him up sweet—to hear every word yuh said. Yuh tried tuh kill me, Devil. I couldn't kill you! But yer going tuh die—tuh stretch rope—fer murder. An' when yer hangin' with that noose around yer throat—remember Devil—*I put it there!* An' she's as good as gun lead!"

Devil Delaney collapsed in his chair.

Dry River made a stand-up ride of it as the Bar-6 fogged down on the Long-X buildings. A shot blasted. The battle was on.

BLOOD ON THE STAR

By BART CASSIDY

Reform reared its unfamiliar head at the Bar-6 when "Dry River" Ewing chose to run for sheriff. Misery came with it and stayed until the rebellious Bar-6 balked and ran wild.

"THIS yere thing's got to stop, yuh thimble-headed idjits!" bawled "Dry River" Ewing, owner of Bar-6 Ranch. He forked his cayuse wildly into Rattlesnake Pasture where four of his cowhands, under the leadership of Chalky Greer, the strawboss, were cutting up a slaughtered beef.

The Bar-6 punchers blinked in surprise. Three days ago Dry River had departed from the ranch to attend a political convention at Agua Fria. They had expected him back today, but the tragic expression on his seamed, sunbeaten features puzzled them.

"Welcome home, Dry River," said Chalky Greer, a lengthy man with white eyebrows. He wiped a skinning-knife on his pants. "Did the dellygates pick a good man fer sheriff?" And he explained: "We're jest butcherin' a beef fer fresh table meat."

"Yuh've made a turrible mistake!" Dry River raved, pointing down at the hide of the slaughtered animal.

"No, sir," said Chalky. "No mistake about this. We jest follered the grand ol' range custom yuh teached us, which says to eat yore neighbor's meat an' save yore own critters fer the market. This yere cow had strayed over to our range. It belonged to ol' bill Longley. Yuh'll notice the brand on the hide. It's a Long-X."

"Yeah, a Long-X cow, dang yuh!" wheezed Dry River. "If Bill Longley sees that hide, I'll be plumb ruint!"

"We was gonna bury the hide," Chalky explained.

"Yuh ain't! Yuh're gonna rustle in one o' my own top beeves. I want Longley to know that I won't tolerate havin' my men kill his beef to fill their bellies with. I'm gonna ax his pardon fer what yuh done, an' repay him by presentin' him with a top beef of my own!" Dry River declared righteously.

The cowhands suffered excruciating amazement. What had happened to Dry River, anyhow? He was getting dang virtuous all a-sudden. In this range country, it was the rule rather than the exception that cowmen should supply their tables with meat belonging to a neighbor. There was a silent understanding to this effect. Perhaps, in a strict sense, the custom was hardly ethical; yet practically all cattle-growers, men who would have scorned the idea of stealing a neighbor's cattle and selling them for profit, practiced it.

"Dad-burn it, Dry River," Chalky Greer gulped. "Don't yuh know that the Long-X outfit has been killin' Bar-6 cows fer their meat right along? Jest last week I seen Luke Blivens, the foreman, shootin' a Bar-6 critter. But I jest rode on by, practicin' range etty-kwet an' pertendin' not to notice."

"Makes no difference what Luke Blivens done!" Dry River howled. "Bill Longley ain't 'round his Long-X outfit hardly enough to savvy all that Blivens does. Longley he's a powerful honest an' conscientious feller. It'll hurt my chances onless he thinks I'm the same."

Then he smoothed his broad chest and stated proudly, "Boys, the convention at Agua Fria has bestowed on me a great an' unsought honor. They've done nominated me to be their candidate fer sheriff o' Boulder County!"

"Whoop! Yippy-yee!" yelled the Bar-6 cowhands, and they swarmed around to offer their congratulations.

"An' yuh aims to ree-form from all bad habits, like eatin' yore neighbor's beef, jest 'cause yuh're runnin' fer sheriff, do yuh, Dry River?" Chalky asked, a bit doubtfully, after a moment.

Dry River explained. He had always nourished a secret ambition to wear a sheriff's badge, he said. But in order to be elected sheriff, he would need old Bill Longley's political support.

LONGLEY was one of the richest and most influential men in the state. He owned two cattle ranches—one the Long-X, which adjoined the Bar-6; the other a larger outfit that occupied the entire Agua Fria grant, near the town of the same name. Longley spent most of his time at the Agua Fria Ranch, but occasionally made trips of inspection down to the Long-X, where Luke Blivens was in charge as foreman.

"Longley's a power in politics," Dry River explained. "The candidates he supports fer office allus wins. If he comes out an' backs me fer sheriff, I'm jest the same as elected. Soon as the convention was over I went out to his Agua Fria Ranch to talk to him, but the Agua Fria ranch-boss told me he'd come down here to the Long-X fer a spell."

"Yuh ain't gonna crawl to no man fer his political support, air yuh, Dry River?" Chalky blurted, in a horrified tone. "That ain't yore style."

"I gotta git Longley's support," came the dogged answer. "An' fillin' up yore hungry bellies with his meat is a pore way to start. Longley's a church member, an' a powerful honest man."

"Mebbyso," Chalky grunted. "But shorely a man that's so all-fired honest wouldn't put a cow-thief like Luke Blivens in charge o' the Long-X Ranch. An' I notice that sence Blivens took charge he's canned all the ol' Long-X hands an' hired a pack o' gun-totin' scissor-bills o' his own stripe. Ever'body knows Blivens has been in jail fer stealin' cows."

"Blivens is a good cow foreman," Dry River Ewing asserted. "But after he got out o' jail, nobody'd hire him, account o' his past record. He begged Longley to give him a chanst to ree-form an' make a man o' hisself. Longley took pity on him. Longley's a powerful good-hearted man. He tries to carry out the Good Book teachin' about doin' unto others as yuh'd do to yore brother's keeper."

Chalky snorted in disdain.

Dry River gestured impatiently. "Rope one o' my top beeves, an' be dang quick about it!"

Grumbling among themselves, the cowhands obeyed. Half an hour later they hit the breeze toward the Long-X Ranch, driving a big Bar-6 Hereford steer ahead. With a disgusted air, Chalky bore the hide of the butchered Long-X animal. Dry River rode in the lead, silent and dignified. His coat pockets were stuffed with cigars.

Luke Blivens, the Long-X foreman, came out the big square ranch house, and closed the door hurriedly. The three Long-X punchers were at his heels—a shifty-eyed trio each wearing a gun.

"What in hell do yuh want?" Blivens demanded, glowering at his visitors.

"Have a seegar, Luke," said Dry River heartily. "Is yore boss here?"

"Naw, Longley ain't here," Blivens scowled.

"They told me at the Agua Fria Ranch that Longley had headed down here," said Dry River.

"He ain't here, I tell yuh!" Blivens snapped. "They told yuh wrong. I ain't expectin' Longley no ways soon."

"Well, I want to see him," began Dry River.

"Longley ain't here—What do *yuh* want?" Blivens shouted.

"Have another seegar," offered Dry River. He cleared his throat, and orated. "Luke, I got a message I want yuh to deliver to Longley soon as he shows up here. The Agua Fria convention has done honored me by nominatin' me fer the office o' sheriff. I aims to merit this honor to the extent o' my ability. Fer long time now, us neighbors has been killin' each other's cows fer meat—"

"If yuh try to accuse me o' ever killin' any o' yore cows, I'll shoot hell out o' yuh, yuh red-necked ol' buzzard!" Blivens yelled.

Dry River, who had never been one to endure such insulting words from another, could say nothing for a moment.

But Chalky Greer leaned over, shook his fist in Blivens' face, and bristled "Yuh're a foghorn bluff, Blivens! But yore bluff don't go here. *I* accuse yuh! I seen yuh killin' a Bar-6 cow jest last week."

"Shet up, Chalky," whispered Dry River. "Don't fergit I'm runnin' fer sheriff, dang it."

To Luke Blivens he said, in a placating tone that brought moans of anguish from his cowhands, "I ain't accusin' yuh, Luke. But this yere custom o' eatin a neighbor's beef ain't right. I bet Longley don't approve of it, an' I want him to know I don't either."

At this point, from the house came a low, moaning sound.

"RED," said Blivens swiftly to one of his men, "go in there an' stop that!" "Red" disappeared into the house and Blivens explained, "Red bought a houn'-dorg from a Mexican last week, an' took it in the house. The durn fool dorg laid down last night an' had a litter o' pups. She's been a-goin' on that-a-way ever sence. It gits on my nerves."

"I don't like dorgs neither," said Dry River agreeably. He held up the hide of the butchered Long-X cow. "Luke, I want yuh to tell Longley this: Unbeknownst to me, my cowhands butchered one o' yore Long-X cows fer meat this mornin'. This hide is it. I cain't bring the critter back to life, but I apologize from my heart up. An' to repay

Longley fer the loss o' the critter, I've brung over one o' my top beeves, with a bill o' sale fer same. We're in fer a spell o' ree-form at the Bar-6. From now on I aims to run a ranch that Bill Longley will be proud to have j'inin' up with him."

Luke Blivens stared at the hide, at the cow, at Dry River.

"Yuh ol' polecat!" he snorted angrily. "Are yuh tryin' to hurrah me—or what?"

Then, convinced of the Bar-6 owner's sincerity he began to laugh.

"Boys," he guffawed to his men, pointing derisively at Dry River, "this is the beatin'est thing yet! He apologizes—brings us a cow—to pay fer a Long-X critter his boys butchered fer meat! Haw haw! Did yuh ever hear the likes? The ol' gent's gittin' soft in the head!"

The Long-X punchers shrieked with laughter. They jeered at Dry River and his men. Chalky Greer licked his white lips and glanced pleadingly at Dry River.

But the latter, after a painful gulp, controlled himself and pretended to ignore the insulting gibes.

"Well, yuh tell Longley how it is, Luke," he said, and rode toward the Long-X men, extending a handful of cigars. "Have a seegar apiece, fellers. I'll appreciate yore votes."

Luke Blivens threw his cigar to the ground and stamped on it.

"I tell yuh I ain't expectin' Longley no ways soon!" he roared. "Keep yore dang cabbage-leafs, an' git the hell out o' here. Sheriff—huh! Yuh'd make a helluva sheriff!"

"I'll ride over agin an' see Longley when he comes," said Dry River in his most dignified manner. "Turn that steer loose, boys. *Adios,* Luke."

He and his cowhands rode back to the Bar-6. Chalky Greer began to swear.

"Why did yuh take that kind o' talk off'n that Luke Blivens?"

"Every vote counts," said the determined candidate, simply. "I'm runnin' fer sheriff. An' I got to have Bill Longley's support."

"Yuh've made the Bar-6 the laughin' stock o' this hull country," Chalky raved. "I'll be a blankety-blank-blank—"

"Shet up!" roared Dry River Ewing. "From now on, my ranch is gonna be one that'll command the complete respeck o' every voter in this yere country. Yessir, things is gonna ree-form here at the Bar-6. An' that ree-form starts with you, Chalky Greer. If a church member like Bill Longley'd hear yuh cussin' that-a-way, my chances'd be plumb ruint. Next time I ketch yuh cussin', yuh'll find out darned quick that yuh lose yore job!"

Chalky hung on to his saddlehorn. "No more cussin', no more talkin'," he gulped, for his tongue was hinged to flap but one way, and that profane. "Boys, I can't believe this o' Dry River Ewing! Many's the time I've heard him throw cuss-words in a way that'd make a mule-skinner turn sick with envy."

"Dry River has shore got hisself pizened with virtue sence he started candidatin' 'round," grunted another Bar-6 man. "But, dang it, mebby we won't have to keep on draggin' our tails between our legs. There ain't nothin' to stop us from strappin' on our six-guns an' sneakin' over to the Long-X an' gittin' due an' proper revenge on that bunch o' brayin' jassacks."

Dry River heard him. "Ain't, huh?" he yelled savagely. "Well, the first feller I ketch packin' a gun from now on gits his time damn' *pronto!* If yuh durn halfwits started a gun-fight with the Long-X's it'd plumb ruin my chances fer sheriff. Gun-totin' is contrary to the dignity o' the law, anyways, an' as a candidate fer sheriff I want my men to leave their guns in the bunkhouse an' act peaceable an' law-abidin'. That's another ree-form that's goin' into effect at the Bar-6."

AT nightfall, Dry River proclaimed still another "ree-form." The hands had gathered around a soap-box, playing penny ante. Without warning he crashed into the bunkhouse upon them, picked up the cards and threw them into the stove.

"I won't allow no more poker-playin' on my ranch!" he shouted. "Gamblin' an' all sech is allus 'sociated with the vice element when a election is comin' on. If Bill Longley knowed yuh fellers was sech poker fiends, he'd refuse to support me fer sheriff, an' my chances'd be plumb ruint."

"Curfew has done rung tonight, fellers," said Chalky Greer dismally, after Dry River had gone.

But "Runt" Cassidy, one of the punchers, rebelled. He loved to play poker.

"This here ree-form has gone too fur!" he yapped. "The Ol' Man's a durn fool. I'm plumb disgusted to see him crawlin' on his belly thisaway jest to git Bill Longley's support. Anyways, mebby he ain't got Longley figgered right. I got an idee that Longley's a kinda hypocrite, an' that he belongs to church jest so's he'll have a blind to cover up some shady dealin's he carries on. Hell, no saint like he pertends to be would keep Luke Blivens an' them tough Long-X waddies in his hire."

Runt grabbed his hat.

"I'm goin' over to the Long-X," he announced bitterly. "Dry River has done driv me to it. When leetle boys like me is denied innocent diversion like cyards at home, they alus drifts away an' falls into bad comp'ny. Luke Blivens has invited me more'n oncet to come over to the Long-X an' set in a poker game. I'll jest go over tonight. I ain't got no partic'lar love fer that Long-X outfit, but I likes to play poker."

At midnight Runt returned from the Long-X. His eyes were swollen shut, and there was a long gash on his right cheek.

"Jumpin' tarantulas!" gasped Chalky, sitting up in his bunk. "What's happened to yuh, Runt?"

"I fell into bad comp'ny," said the little puncher weakly. "Ever'thing looked peaceful when I rode up to the Long-X. There was a big bunch o' cows in a pasture clost by the house. I couid hear the critters sighin' contented-like an' lickin' each other's sides. An' the moon was shinin' grand. Ever'thing was peaceful till Luke Blivens stuck his head out the door to see who I was. He was powerful hostile at first. But when I explains that I jest come to play a leetle poker, he finally calms down an' lets me come in. So we plays poker, an' it was me agin them four Long-X gents, 'ceptin' a few times when that Red cowboy has to leave the game to take care o' that houn-dorg that had pups. That dorg's somewhere in a room to the back, an' every oncet in a while she moans in a voice that's 'most human."

"But what happened to yore face?"

"Luke Blivens done it," Runt groaned. "Yuh see, my brand o' poker was superior to the Long-X fellers'. I plays fair an' square, but I manages to corral all their money. Then all at oncet Luke Blivens he piles into me, an' blacks my eyes an' elsewhere, an' takes all the money I've won."

"Air we gonna stand fer that?" howled Chalky Greer, climbing into his pants.

He tore up to the main house, roused Dry River Ewing, and told the story.

"Yuh say that pock-faced Blivens skunk beat up a leetle feller like our Runt?" cried Dry River furiously. "Wait till I git my gun! I'll clean out that dang Long-X—"

"Now yuh're talkin' like yoreself, Dry River!" Chalky cheered.

Dry River pondered a moment, and finally shook his head.

"No," he said heavily. "'T'won't do to start no trouble with the Long-X outfit. It'd ruin my chances fer sheriff."

DISGUSTED, Chalky tracked back to the bunkhouse. "Nothin' doin,' fellers," he groaned. "A ambition to wear a nickel-plated star has ruint Dry River. He used to wear horns, but now he's sprouted wings. This here cow-ranch has sunk lower'n a mired mule in my estimation!"

Next morning, a neighbor rode up to Bar-6 and offered Dry River congratulations upon his nomination for sheriff.

"But if I was yuh, Dry River," he advised, "I'd see Bill Longley an' try to git his support."

"I been a-tryin' to see him—"

"He's over at the Long-X now. Leastways, I seen that expensive stockin'-legged sorrel saddler o' his in the Long-X corral a minute ago when I rode past. There was a big bunch of cattle in the pasture clost by, too. I reckon Longley's come down to supervise a shipment of beeves."

Fifteen minutes later, Dry River Ewing was on his way to the Long-X ranch. He had ordered his cowhands to remain at the Bar-6, for he feared that if they came in contact with the Long-X men, a fight would be the natural result. To signify his own peaceable intentions, he wore no gun.

"But that dang Luke Blivens!" he growled to himself. "Pickin' on a leetle feller like our Runt Cassidy!"

As he dusted across the Long-X range, he glimpsed the three Long-X punchers in the distance. They were driving a bunch of cows. But he saw nothing of Luke Blivens or Bill Longley; so he rode on to the Long-X ranch house.

"What in hell air yuh doin' here again, yuh meddlin' ol' buzzard!" snarled Luke Blivens, appearing suddenly in the doorway, a shotgun in his hands. "I told yuh not to come back."

"Jest a friendly visit," said Dry River, dismounting. "I want to see Longley."

"He ain't here! I told yuh I wasn't expectin' him no ways soon."

Dry River glanced toward the corral. "Ain't that his fancy stockin'-legged saddler over there?"

"Naw, it ain't! That's jest one o' our range broncs." His face livid, Blivens pointed toward the Bar-6. "Git, yuh ol' polecat!"

"Don't call me no polecat!" gulped Dry River.

"I'll count three. If yuh don't hightail fer home by then, I'll turn loose this yere scatter-gun on yuh! *One—*"

"Dang yuh," bristled Dry River, backing off and pulling his horse after him. "If I had a gun—"

"Two!"

"Yuh lousy jail-bird!" bawled Dry River, turning in a circle, the better to mount his spirited horse. "I'll—"

"Three, dang yuh!"

Boom! The shotgun sheeted flame. Dry River, whose back was turned at the time, experienced an unpleasant sensation such as comes when one sits down in a bed of cactus.

"I'm shot!" he grunted, clapping one hand to the rear.

Stung by a leaden pellet, the horse reared high in the air. Dry River clutched the saddlehorn, swung astride, and allowed the bolting animal to carry him home.

Standing up in the stirrups, he galloped wildly to the Bar-6 corral.

"Fetch me my gun!" he bellowed to his cowhands, who came running, pop-eyed, from the bunkhouse. "Ouch! Help me down, Chalky. Ow-w-w-w! I'm as full o' shot as a dead pa'tridge. Gimme my forty-five. Git yore own guns, all of yuh. We're gonna clean out that dang Long-X outfit!" he raved.

"Hooray!" whooped Chalky Greer.

"'Tain't no time fer rejoicin', yuh idjit!" Dry River fumed. "I'm shot. Luke Blivens shot me when my back was turned."

"He shot yuh in the back?"

"No—jest below. Birdshot—they're settin' me crazy! Git yore knife an' dig some of 'em out, Chalky."

CHALKY accomplished a bit of crude but helpful surgery. He dug out eleven leaden pellets from Dry River's wounds. Meanwhile the other Bar-6 men hastily roped out a mount apiece and buckled on their guns.

"The Ol' Man's hisself again!" laughed Runt Cassidy happily, trying to keep his swollen eyes unbuttoned.

"I got eleven o' them birdshot out, Dry River," panted Chalky Greer. "There's three or four more, but they're in kinda deep. Still, mebby yuh kin ride now—if I fetch yuh a piller—"

"I kin ride standin' up!" yowled Dry River, rearing and charging. "Come on, yuh rannies. We'll show them Long-X polecats that us Bar-6 gents has got shootin'-irons as well as guts."

Chalky began, "Is Bill Longley—"

"Longley kin go plumb to hell!"

"Did he say he wouldn't support yuh fer sheriff?"

"Didn't see him," bawled Dry River Ewing. "But I don't give a durn whether he supports me or not. I don't give a durn about bein' elected sheriff now. I'm out fer blood!"

The Bar-6 cowhands whooped their approval. They split the breeze toward the Long-X ranch. Dry River made a stand-up ride of it. As they fogged down on the Long-X buildings, a herd of cattle, driven by the three Long-X punchers, hove into view over a hill to the east.

"Git them fellers!" Dry River roared to his men. "I'll take keer o' Luke Blivens my own self. He's my meat!"

The Bar-6 men rushed to obey. The Long-X punchers saw them coming, and hastily drew their guns. A shot blasted on the air. The battle was on.

Dry River rode recklessly straight for

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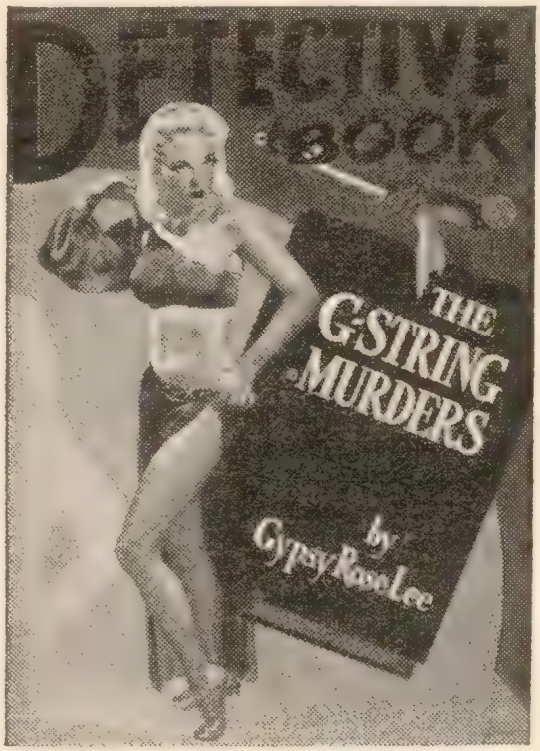

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the Long-X ranch house. Luke Blivens' scowling face appeared at a front window. He raised a sixshooter and fired.

But Dry River had stretched flat upon the neck of his horse. He galloped by the window unscathed. He whirled around the corner of the house, smashed a side window with his gun, and dived inside.

"Git out o' this house!" Blivens snarled.

He was in an adjoining room. The connecting door was closed. Bliven's gun roared again. The bullet splintered the door. A second bullet came. It ripped a patch of hide off Dry River's weather-beaten right cheek.

He howled angrily. "I'm gonna git yuh, yuh polecat, an' hang yore hide on a fence an' let the wind blow the stink out of it!"

He threw down with his big forty-five and pumped five shots through the door.

A groan sounded from the other room. Dry River yanked open the splintered door. Luke Blivens was huddled up on the far side of the room. He had dropped his gun. His left hand was clutching painfully at his bleeding right wrist. One of Dry River's random bullets had wounded him.

"Surrender! Hands up!" shouted Dry River, advancing.

But Blivens suddenly dodged through another door and ran toward the rear of the house in a frantic effort to escape.

Dry River threw down on him with his sixshooter, but the hammer clicked on an exploded shell. The gun was empty.

"Stop, durn yuh!" Dry River howled.

He rushed in pursuit. Blivens was plunging down a dim hallway. Dry River gained on him. All at once, Blivens stopped abruptly at the door of a rear room. He hesitated, then whirled and lunged headforemost at his pursuer.

They crashed together. Each staggered back, groggy from the impact. Then Dry River rushed again. He upset Blivens. They piled through the open door of the room at the rear. When they hit the floor, Dry River was on top. He slammed his sixshooter down on Blivens' head, and Blivens slept.

A MOMENT later Chalky Greer came running into the room.

"Huh, Luke Blevins don't seem to be feelin' right well!" he chuckled. "Us fellers cleaned up on them Long-X punchers an' took their guns away from 'em, Dry River. The other boys is standin' guard over 'em outside." He gave a sudden start. "Gosh, what's that?"

"M-m-m-m!" The peculiar sound had come from a corner of the room. Here stood a bed, and on the bed, completely covered by blankets, lay a lumpy figure.

Chalky yanked back the covers and exposed the features of a long-jawed, browned and grizzled man.

"Bill Longley!" ejaculated Dry River Ewing.

A glint of suspicion shot to his eyes. Prancing forward, he shook his fist in Longley's face.

"Tryin' to hide here, was yuh, Longley?" he bawled. "Dang yore skin, I bet yuh've been here at the ranch all this time. I bet yuh put Luke Blivens up to insultin' me. I bet yuh had him try to kill me! An' here I'd been takin' great pains to— Durn yuh, I'm a candidate fer sheriff o' this yere county, but I'd deem it a disgrace to have men o' yore stripe supportin' me!"

CHALKY GREER thrilled at his employer's statement. Dry River was again the fighting, independent rip-snorter of old. The showdown had come, and he was not going to crawl to Bill Longley nor to any one else for political support. Maybe it meant a licking in the election; but he would take his licking like a man.

"Gents," spoke Bill Longley, in a queer, smothered tone, "cut me loose, please!"

"Cut yuh loose?" began Chalky, bewildered. Then he leaned over and snatched the blankets completely off the bed.

Bill Longley was bound hand and foot.

"Hog-tied!" gasped Dry River Ewing, incredulously.

"Luke Blivens done it," said Longley. "Serves me right fer lettin' pity git the best o' my jedgment. I pitied Blivens. After he got out o' jail, he begged me for a chanst to ree-form. I told him I'd try him out on this foreman job. But when I come down here two days ago—"

Dry River gasped.

"Two days ago?"

"Shore," said Longley. "Two days ago. I found things lookin' suspicious. Without my authority, Blivens had kicked out all my ol' dependable cowhands an' hired a passel o' hard-lookin' strangers. I tells the hull outfit they're fired. Which they answers by tyin' me up an' holdin' me prisoner while they rounds up my cattle an' prepares to steal 'em. Yuh fellers has saved me!"

The news completely dazed Dry River.

Chalky put in hastily, "All the credit belongs to Dry River here—the fightin'-est ol' longhorn that ever throwed a six-gun!"

Bill Longley nodded, and cried heartily, "Gimme yore paw, Dry River Ewing. I ain't bearin' yuh no hard feelin's fer the way yuh bawled me out. Yuh jest misunderstood. By savin' me an' my cows today, yuh've proved yuh've got a good detective instinct an' that yuh're the very man this county needs to run down desprit gangs like this Luke Blivens bunch. Yuh're my candidate fer sheriff!"

"Well, I be durned," said Dry River, still dazed. "Yessir, I reckon I got a good detective instinct. An' I'm shore pizen when a feller shoots me in the seat o' the pants."

Chalky was untying Longley's legs. "Say, we'all heerd some moanin' sounds yestiddy. Luke Blivens claimed—"

Longley grinned sheepishly. "It was me, tried to attract yore attention. Blivens lied. He tried to make yuh believe I was a houn'-dorg."

Dry River Ewing rushed outside, where his punchers were holding Blivens' three accomplices under guard.

"All kinds o' ree-form is hereby declared off at the Bar-6," he announced emphatically. "I've diskivvered that the best way fer a man to run fer sheriff is jest to be his own natural self. An' from now on I want yuh dang hell-raisin' rannies to be the same!"

PROVES MAN IS GOD

A strange method of mind and body control, that leads to immense powers never before experienced, is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, F.R.G.S., well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report improvement in health. Others acquire superb bodily strength, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often, with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

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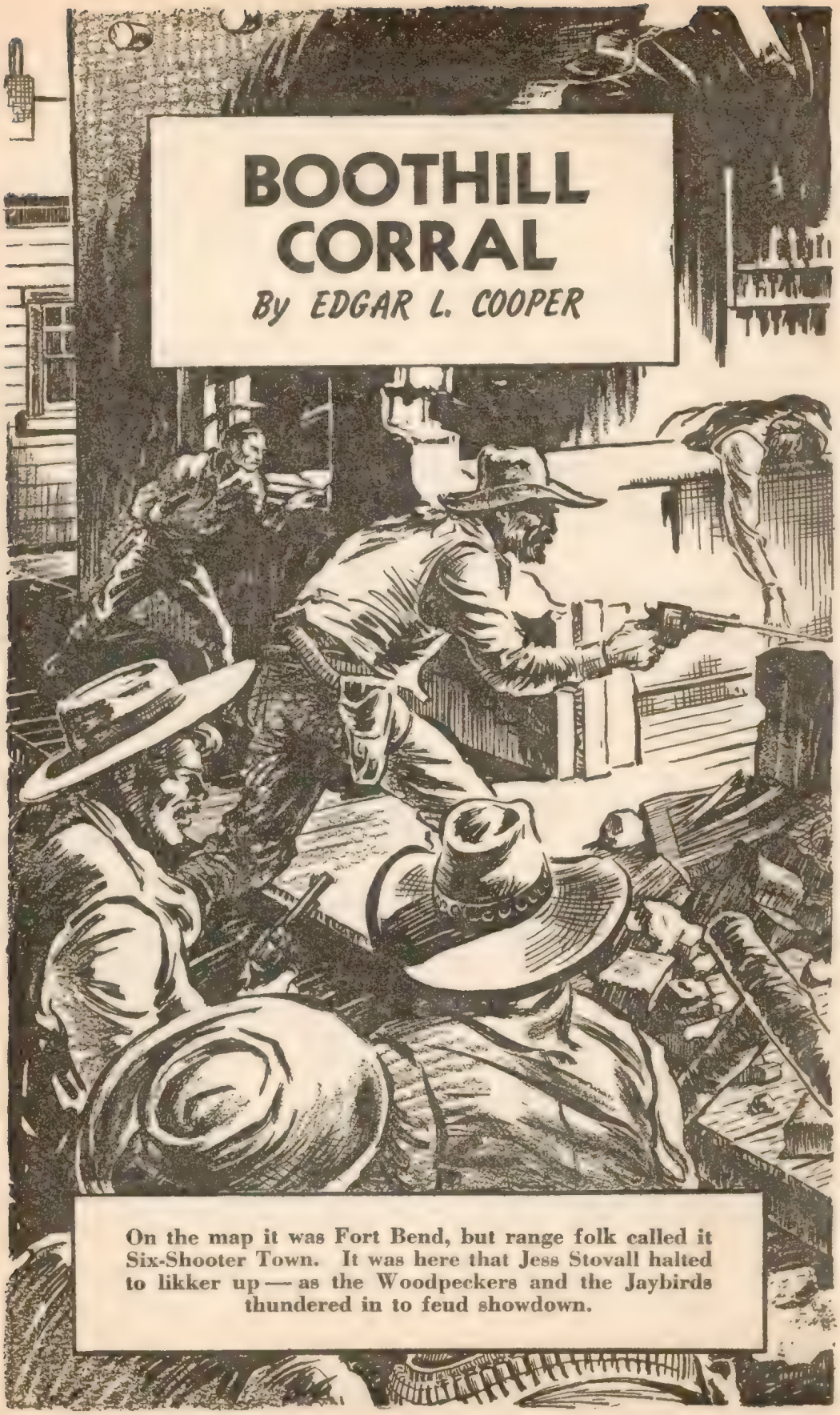
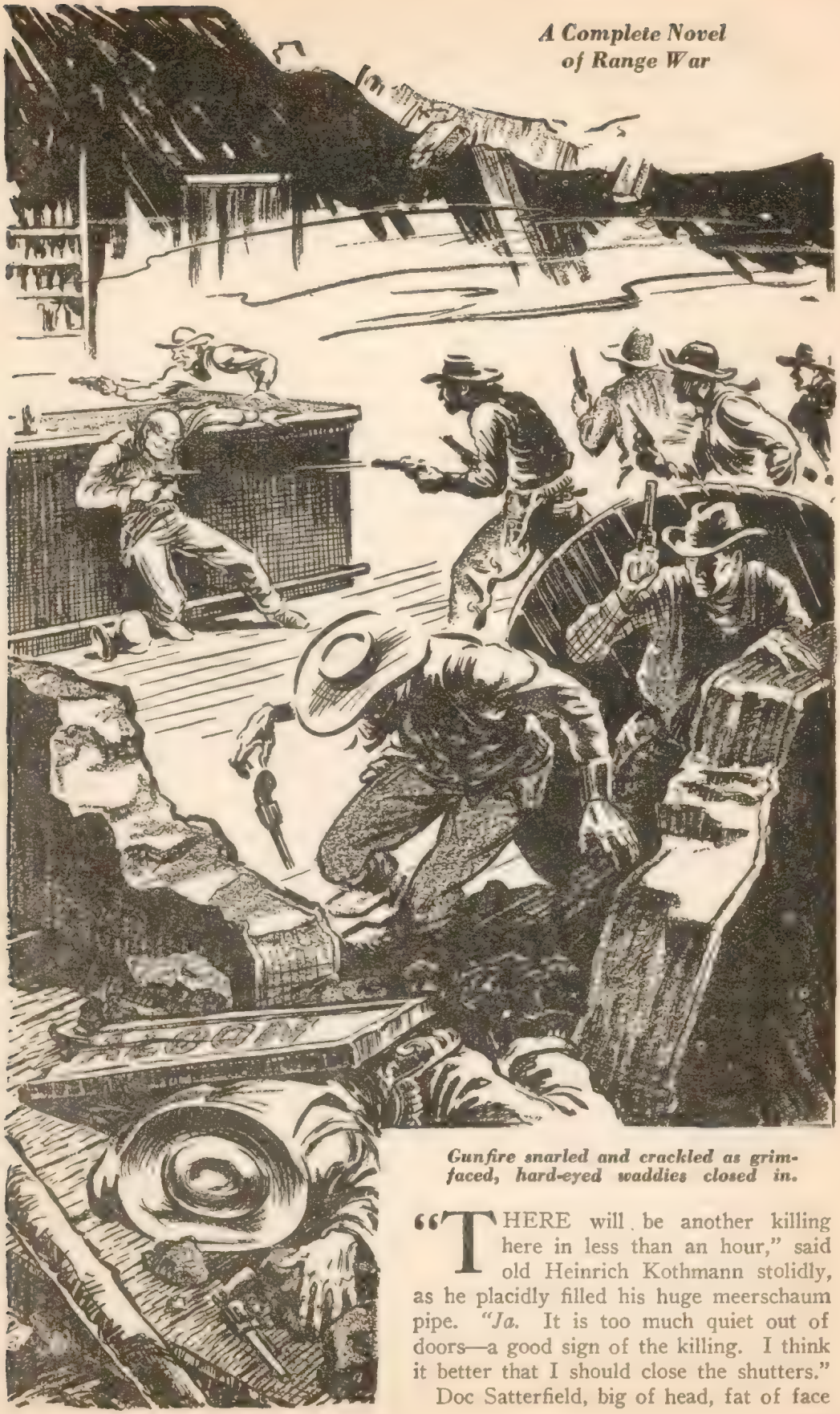


BOOTHILL CORRAL

By EDGAR L. COOPER

On the map it was Fort Bend, but range folk called it Six-Shooter Town. It was here that Jess Stovall halted to likker up — as the Woodpeckers and the Jaybirds thundered in to feud showdown.

A Complete Novel of Range War



Gunfire snarled and crackled as grim-faced, hard-eyed waddies closed in.

"THERE will be another killing here in less than an hour," said old Heinrich Kothmann stolidly, as he placidly filled his huge meerschaum pipe. "*Ja.* It is too much quiet out of doors—a good sign of the killing. I think it better that I should close the shutters."

Doc Satterfield, big of head, fat of face

and fat of paunch, wrinkled his gimlet eyes and grinned at the little Dutch saddlemaker. "Then you and me, Henry, sitting here in your domicile in the shank of the evening, ought to have plumb good tickets to the execution. I always did say your shop was the prize box seat to all that happened in Fort Bend."

The sixty-year-old saddlemaker shook his gray head, puffed complacently and went back to his dusty, littered work bench. While Satterfield, the official medico and sawbones of the more than tough town of Fort Bend, relit his dead stogie and with feet propped against the cold cannonball stove surveyed the main street and its western terminus through half closed lids. Outwardly the scene was calm and peaceable.

But perhaps Doc Satterfield, from his point of vantage where he could command a view of Navisad Crossing and the stage road to Angelina, was the first denizen of the turbulent community to observe the approach of a horseman who was soon to disrupt the momentary peace and calm of Fort Bend. Doc squinted his puffy eyes tighter, took the reeking cheroot from his lips, hid a prodigious yawn with one hand.

"Rider coming, Henry," he observed blandly. "From over Chimney Buttes way."

Old Heinrich got up slowly, shuffled his stoop-shouldered figure to the window, and peered over his glasses down the hot, quiet street. Then without a word he pulled together the heavy wooden shutters and returned to his bench.

Once, and only once, did he glance at the series of perforations in the board-and-bat wall of the smoke-fagged little room. Doc Satterfield grunted, slid well back in his groaning chair and closed his eyes.

He too, had lived long enough in Fort Bend to know that things happened there with startling, unexpected swiftness.

JESS STOVALL turned his palomina pony from the stage road into the main drag of Fort Bend with a sigh of relief. Since sun-up he had been in the saddle, riding through greaseweed and sand and chaparral, and the day had been hot. Now the shadows were growing long and purple, and the prospect of drink and food was doubly alluring. Stovall's black eyes scanned the town interestedly as he leisurely walked his pony up the hardpan street between the rows of adobe and false-fronted wooden buildings, looking for the first convenient hitchrack and saloon.

Many tales he had heard of this place, and none of them pretty.

He saw an ordinary frontier town, save that this was the county seat of the Post Oak country. The courthouse, jail and sheriff's office all were in the single two-story building the town boasted—a red stone structure near its east end. The straggly main street was lined with the usual establishments of a fairish sized Texas cowtown—saloons and dancehalls, a hotel, blacksmith shops, stores, the post-office, restaurants. Men moved to and fro leisurely, stopping to talk to each other beside hitchracks or in the *caliche* road. Hard on the straggly outskirts, south and west, the Navisad River curved in a half moon, a high-bluffed, sluggish stream, its banks heavily wooded.

Many eyes followed the rider as he traversed the high drag; several men nodded impersonal greeting to him. Once he stopped and asked a buck-toothed cowboy the whereabouts of one Tim Breen, and was directed to a saloon farther up the street. It bore across its false front the big, black lettered sign, "The Buzzard." Stovall thanked him politely and headed his cayuse toward the hitchrack.

Then he chuckled to himself.

"Funny name old Tim's picked out for his thirst emporium," he grinned. "He was runnin' The Legal Tender last time I saw him in 'Paso, three, four years ago."

Doc Satterfield, studying the stranger with half closed eyes, took the feather duster of cigar butt from his lips and heaved himself to a more upright position in Henry Kothmann's rawhide bottom chair. The little saddler also was peering at Jess Stovall over his steel rimmed spectacles as the rider jogged up the street.

"Henry," rumbled Doc, "that hombre is a gunfighter. Lookit the way he carries his hogleg, the way he holds his right arm. Wonder which side brought *him* in?"

Kothmann clucked his tongue. "Soon Boot Hill will be so full we must start another cemetery. *Ach!*"

"Well," chuckled Doc, "whoever named this place 'Six-Shooter Junction' had more

sense than poetry. Gimme a match, Henry."

It was while he was lighting his cheroot that a band of horsemen came into Fort Bend from the eastern end of main street.

Jess Stovall dismounted leisurely before the Buzzard Bar and flipped the reins of his palomino across the hitchrack without tying them. Two other horses lashed behind the saddle, as well as the .30-30 Winchester in its scabbard. The saddlebags he slung across his left arm and carried with him. Stepping across the board sidewalk, he shoved open the swinging green doors and entered.

Conversation flagged as Stovall entered, and every eye in the room fastened upon him in silent scrutiny. They took him in from the heels of his dusty boots to the crown of his Stetson.

THEY saw a slim and straight and careless looking fellow of some twenty-eight or thirty—a jet-eyed stranger, closely knit as a puma and who moved with a sort of pantherish grace and wore his walnut butted six gun on a left hip well to the front on a full cartridge belt. His chaps were scuffed, his black shirt open at the throat, his boots worn.

But especially they noticed the inky blackness of his eyes, the lean, high cheekboned face, burned to a dark mahogany by sun and wind, the thinness of his lips. And his voice was a soft Texan drawl.

"Howdy, Tim," he said. "Long time no see, feller. How's tricks?"

Tim Breen, the burly, gray haired, red faced proprietor of the Buzzard, stared hard a second, then slapped the bar lustily with a beefy hand. "Jess Stovall!" he bellowed. "Well, for the luvva likker! Where in tarnation didja come from?"

"Santone—and other places," grinned Jess, shaking hands with him. "Hyah, hombre?"

"Oh, so-so, so-so. What yuh drinkin'?"

"Straight. Got plenty alkali in my gizzard. And—" Stovall turned to the others in the room—"I'm buyin' this trip, gents. Step up and name her."

They stepped, all except a quartet engaged in a poker game, who waved their thanks from the table. As Tim hustled out glasses and bottles the band of horsemen, who had entered the east end of town, rode down the street, some seven or eight in number. Several of them laughed loudly.

A lanky puncher in ragged chaps, wearing a high peaked Texas hat with limp brim, stood at Stovall's elbow. He was a horse-faced, heavy eyed jasper, shiftless and indolent looking. He watched the cavalcade ride on down-street, squinted into his whisky glass, grinned crookedly.

"Did Tim ever tell yuh why he named his bailiwick the Buzzard?" he asked.

Jess professed ignorance, while Breen scowled and muttered.

"Well, then I'll enlighten yuh," went on Slim, "as I gather you're a pilgrim in these diggin's. But hain't you heard of the Woodpeckers and Jaybirds?"

Stovall admitted that he had heard of the two rival factions that were making Fort Bend and the surrounding country a feud hotbed. But he knew nothing else about them.

"Well," chuckled Slim Mulvahill, "a feller can't hardly live here without takin' sides, one way or another, yuh know. Old Tim's a wise bird—and not no owl, neither. They ast him which he was, a Peckerwood or a Jay, and he up and tells 'em, 'By Godfrey, I ain't neither one. I'm a neutral buzzard, and it's a ten dollar fine to kill me!' "

Slim guffawed and slapped his leg, and the laughter was general. Tim grinned wryly and swabbed a perfectly dry bar, and Stovall favored him with a sly wink. There was a State law against killing the sky scavengers. "Still smart as ever, ain't yuh?" he said.

"I stay healthy by mindin' my own bizzness," growled Tim. "Consequently when any of the Peckers or Jays troop in the Buzzard they let me alone, down their likker and clear out without no ruckus. They got their own hangouts down the street."

"Yeah," volunteered Slim, "the Buckhorn and Little South Hell. The Jays use the first, the Peckers the other. Sometimes things is quite salubrious down that way, mister." He turned to Jess.

"Ain't aimin' to git personal, friend," he said guilelessly, "but are yuh just passin' through or huntin' a job punchin' cows yereabouts?"

"Neither," said Stovall. "Why? You want to hire a steer wrangler?"

"No, mister. I'm on the loose myself—

got fired from the Diamond Tail day before yesterday. That's the Jaybird spread, yuh sabe—old Tate Deever's Chimney Buttes outfit."

"Yeh," cut in Tim. "Slim is nearsighted, and couldn't tell the Chimney Buttes iron from his own, so Concho Bozeman fired him. Concho's old Tate's foreman. Ain't that right, Slim?"

"Nope. I got fired fer knowin' too danged much—which is one thing you'll never get your time for, Tim. The drinks are on me this time, gents. Regards to your aunt!"

They were downing their drinks when four men entered the front door.

All were heavily armed; all save one carried two six-shooters. Dressed in nondescript range garb, spurs jangling, bootheels tramping heavily. Salty looking customers, every one. They made straight for the bar with short nods of greeting to the scattering of men present and ordered whisky. Tim Breen, his florid face impassive, quietly set out their drinks.

II

JESS STOVALL could see that the quartet was eying him without pretense, and Slim, next to him, whispered from a corner of his mouth that they were from the Purgatory spread up in the hills—"old Jimble-Jaw Henley's layout, the Woodpeckers," and they were part of the gang that had shortly before ridden into Fort Bend. Stovall nodded.

One of them, a tall, hook-nosed fellow with shallow eyes the color of skimmed milk and a droopy, sandy mustache, wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand and faced Jess and Slim who now stood alone toward one end of the bar. The poker game in the corner hadn't once stopped, and the players seemed intent upon their play.

"You the hombre that belongs to that cayuse out yonder?"

Stovall glanced down the bar at the words. The tall man was looking at him questioningly, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt. The poker players looked around at him.

"That's my pony, yes." Stovall's voice was quiet. "Why?"

"Oh, nothin'. What's yore name, and just what are you doin' around here?"

Jess Stovall slowly turned, hooked his elbows on the bar, his supple fingers busy with the makings. "You the sheriff, maybe?" he queried softly. "Yore questions are kinda personal, ain't they, *amigo?*"

"Shore they are," said the tall Woodpecker insolently, "and I aim to keep 'em personal. Who brung you in here to Fort Bend?"

Jess lit the querley, inhaled a drag before answering. "That Palomino out yonder."

"You don't reckon you mebbe stopped ridin' too soon, do yuh? If a feller's got the sense of a blind dogie, he'll keep right on bein' a stranger around these diggin's. Savvy, hombre?"

Stovall's eyes narrowed. "I savvy one thing, Bitter Creeker," he said, and his voice had suddenly gone cold as ice. "And that is, you are gonna hub plenty hell *muy* pronto if you don't keep off my toes. What's *your* monicker, anyhow?"

"Shep Pullen." The man's shallow eyes contracted, took on a curious glitter as they rested on Stovall. "Shep Pullen, of the Purgatory," he repeated. "That mean anything to you, Mister 'One-Two' Lusk?"

"Not a thing. And my name don't happen to be Lusk, either."

"Since when?" sneered Pullen, "Tryin' to tell me that old tarantula Tate Deever didn't hire yuh too—"

"Hold your horses, Shep," cut in Tim Breen heavily. "You're way off. This feller's no more Lusk than you or me. I know him. He's Jess Stovall, from over Pecos way, and I've knowed him some years."

"What's he doin' here then?" growled Pullen. He glared at Tim. It was evident the tall gunman-puncher had come into the Buzzard primed for trouble, and wasn't particular upon whom he vented his spleen. One of his companions whispered something to him, and after a bit of grumbling he turned to the bar and poured out a stiff drink of liquor. Tim Breen, little beads of sweat dewing his shiny forehead, grinned twistedly at Stovall as he shoved out bottle and glasses to him and Slim.

"A curly wolf," muttered Slim as he

raised his glass. "Pullen's one of old Jimble-Jaw Henley's prime lead slingers. He laid out Dick Hawes of the Diamond here last week, and Dick wasn't no slouch with the irons."

"Lew King and Bandy Lunt. Polecats both. The other'n I don't know. But ole Jimble-Jaw don't hire no infants in arms. I savvy that."

"Oh, well, what's the odds? We won't know the difference a hundred years from now. Here's confusion to the enemy."

Shep Pullen set down his glass with a thump, bent a narrow-eyed glare on Stovall.

"Who-all is this here enemy you are wishin' confusion on, feller?" he demanded belligerently. "Tell me that, huh?"

JESS STOVALL'S mouth suddenly tightened, as if a frost had hit his face. His inky eyes contracted to pin points as he slowly placed his empty glass on the bar and more slowly faced Shep Pullen.

"Anybody," he said in a deadly voice. "Anybody that the shoe fits — and no bars."

Pullen stiffened. His eyes grew blank, narrowed to needle points. Stovall's answer had been like a backhand slap in the face.

"I don't like the way you talk, Mister Man," he said with cold deliberation. "And I don't like you, nuther. Don't like nothin' about yuh. You look like a would-be bad hombre to me." The others, spurs clinking and leather squeaking, began to move unobtrusively aside, Slim Mulvahill included. "There ain't but one place that *malo hombres* like you belong," finished Pullen, "and that's below Boot Hill. I'm gonna peg yore hide on the wall."

"What are you waitin' on?" sneered Stovall. "Cut your wolf loose."

With a move quick as light Pullen's hands flashed for his twin guns, his lean body going into a crouch. Shifting like a boxer, Jess Stovall drew and fired with his left hand. He fired in all one motion so timed and easy and incredibly swift that no eye perceived the action until the move was completed. The thunderous explosions of heavy .45s rocked the barroom as men ducked behind tables or threw themselves flat on the floor.

One of Pullen's bullets struck Stovall's cartridge belt at the buckle, almost driving it into his stomach before glancing off. The impact staggered the Pecos waddie, but not until he had fired his second time. Thinking himself gut-shot, he fired a third time as Shep Pullen was falling, the heavy gun in his left hand spitting a bullet into the floor as he crashed forward on his face.

Stovall's first shot struck Pullen's right hand, shearing off two fingers, then ranged up his forearm to shatter the elbow bone. The second bored a clean hole through his left collar bone and cut an artery. And the third caught the tall Woodpecker high in the left chest, above the heart and through the lung. He lay on the floor, unconscious, with blood dribbling from his nose and mouth.

DEATHLIKE stillness followed the tattoo of shots. Jess Stovall, back against the bar, crouched like a jaguar, a wolf smile flickering about his lips and his weaving .45 covering the trio of Woodpeckers like a swaying rattler's head. Slim Mulvahill, his own gun out, also covered them from his hip, his lanky body tense. The poker players stood up craning forward, watching. Tim Breen, leaning with elbows on the bar, looked out with the impassivity of a red-faced Buddha. In the street someone shouted. Running footsteps sounded. Slim watched the door.

"I didn't come here lookin' for trouble," Jess Stovall said. "But I sure don't aim to ever sidestep it. I guess this feller's got some ambitious friends." He looked straight at the three slack-jawed Woodpeckers who had made no move to draw their guns. "If anybody wants to keep the ball rollin' I'm still here."

No one spoke. Shep Pullen stirred a little, groaned.

"Guess there's no question but what this was a square break?" Jess finished. Again no one spoke until Slim Mulvahill answered with a chuckle, holstering his gun. "Shep went for 'em fust," he said. "He ast for it, and he got it. You hurt, Stovall?"

"Don't know. Got hit in the belly,

but I can still hist a drink. Set 'em out, Tim."

"My Godfrey!" muttered the bartender. *"Drink!"* He wiped his forehead with his sleeves as he set out the bottle.

"We knowed this feller well," said a townsman hoarsely. "Who wants to drink with a dead man layin' at his feet?"

"I do," Stovall replied harshly. "I don't give a damn for any man, dead or alive."

"He ain't dead," added Slim, raising his glass. "One of you friends of his'n better call the doc. He's bleedin' like a stuck hawg. Regards to your aunt, Lightnin'."

"Confusion to the enemy."

And Jess Stovall looked at the three men from Purgatory as he drank. Two of them were bending over Pullen, the third watched Jess with sullen stare. He was a young hairpin, dark as a Mexican and with eyes like a dead shad's.

"You ain't seed or heard the last of this, hombre," he said softly. "I c'n promise yuh that."

"Let your conscience be your guide," replied Jess. "You want to waltz a set, *amigo?*"

The youth hesitated, then shrugged a shoulder. "Why should I give a cheap-John leadslinger like you a chance to show off?" he snarled.

"I reckon the answer's painted in yella letters ten feet high," remarked Stovall.

"Here comes the sheriff," said Tim Breen.

The swinging doors opened, admitting a group of men. In the lead was a big, rawboned fellow of some fifty years, wearing a sweeping gray Stetson and a big .45; a red-jowled man with droopy mustache and muddy gray eyes. Sheriff O'Barr of Post Oak County.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded, his eyes darting about the room to come to rest upon the groaning figure of Shep Pullen. "Who done that?"

"I did." Jess Stovall hooked elbows on the bar and slowly built a brown paper cigarette. "He drew on me, and I beat him to it."

"Oh, yeah? I'll just trouble you for your gun, young feller."

Stovall raised his hands slightly; smiled thinly, crookedly.

"She's set on a hair trigger," he said. "Don't get me in the leg when you take it."

"Humph," grunted the officer, emptying Jess's gun and thrusting it in his waistline. "A left side shooter, huh? Sidewinder. Pretty cool, ain'tcha!"

"Have to be. I've made a bet with a fella that I'll die in bed yet."

The dried-up Woodpecker sneered, now that Stovall was disarmed.

"Which bet you'll lose, *paisano.* I wouldn't give a plugged greaser peso fer yore chances."

Stovall gave him a long, level glance. "Just how much would you give for your chances, amigo?"

Padget, the dark-faced puncher, tensed and his shad eyes took on a peculiar blankness. "Meanin' which, fella?" he snarled. "You gunned Shep when he wasn't lookin'. . . ."

"That," broke in Slim Mulvahill, "is a low-down, dirty lie."

Padget's eyes shifted, took in the fact that Slim's right hand was near his belt. He wet his lips, relaxed slightly, his beady glance darting like a snake's about the room as he scanned the group of faces.

"What you got to do with it?" he demanded hoarsely of Slim. "Ain't no man can call me a liar!"

"Well, I ain't no woman, an' I just called yuh one," retorted Slim placidly. "What you gonna do about it?"

The youth's face worked and his fingers taloned, but the high sheriff of Fort Bend interfered hurriedly. Shep Pullen still lay on the floor of the Buzzard unconscious. Something had to be done about that. Six men carried him out and up the street to Doc Satterwhite's office. To the sheriff's questions it was made plain that Pullen had entered the Buzzard, and deliberately picked a quarrel with the stranger, as well as drawing first. Slim Mulvahill, Tim Breen, two players at the poker table, all gave evidence direct and unquestionable. It was a square break.

SHERIFF O'BARR, an avowed partisan of the Purgatory clan who owed his badge of office to their votes, chewed his mustache impotently, but could do nothing. Shep Pullen had come into the

Buzzard Saloon primed to pick a scrap with the owner of the palomino pony tied at the hitchrack, and had gotten downed in the deal. The evidence was indisputable. And he, the high sheriff of Post Oak, couldn't very well jail even a stranger for that, even though he was aching to do so. Election time was due next week. So he tried to hide his chagrin by volleying a bunch of questions at Stovall.

"What are you doing here, anyhow?" he demanded.

"Looking for something," replied Jess evenly. "And lookin' hard."

"Huh? Looking for what, stranger?"

"Ears."

The sheriff's jaw fell.

"Ears?"

"Yeah—ears. E-a-r-s. Sabe the burro, Señor Sheriff?"

O'Barr blinked stupidly, then his face purpled. "I savvy you're goin' to the calaboose in two shakes of a wooly's tail if you try to get fresh with me, fella!" he bellowed. "Also, I'm doing all the questioning here—remember that."

"So I notice," drawled Jess, his black eyes slowly traveling around the faces in the room. "I'm a stranger in yore country, but this is the first neck of the woods I've ever been frisked of my gun when I had to use it in self-defense. I'd like to be treated as though part of my blood, anyway, was white man's. You can ask all the questions you want and I'll answer on the same basis. That's plain American, ain't it, Mister Sheriff?"

O'Barr's visage became more livid still, and his hand strayed toward his hip. One or two Purgatory partisans present growled angrily, but subsided when they saw the majority were against them. Slim Mulvahill, his horseface grinning, had drawled to O'Barr.

"I wouldn't if I was you, Sheriff. You got his gun, yuh know."

O'Barr cursed under his breath and turned away. "I'm goin' to see how Shep's making out," he growled. "And you, young fella," with a malignant glance at Stovall, "just stay put till I come back."

He stalked from the saloon and up the street. A man laughed under his breath, another spat audibly. Stovall calmly unbuckled his battered cartridge belt, opened his shirt and examined the angry red abrasion on his stomach caused by Pullen's bullet. The skin was barely broken, but the place was all-fired sore. Thanks to the heavy buckle, he had been saved a gut-shot. Jess rebuttoned his shirt with a long sigh of relief.

He didn't hanker for a bullet—then.

"Close," he said to Slim. "Guess the left hind foot of old rabbit's still workin'. That calls for a fill-up on Tim here, huh?"

"My sentiments," grinned Slim. "I can see, cowboy, that you'n me are gonna git along together like ham and aigs. Yeah."

AS Breen slid out the bottle and glasses, Jess asked, "Whose high sheriff is this, Slim?"

"O'Barr?" Mulvahill squinted through his glass. "He's Peckerwood—hoof, hair and hide. Got a grievance ag'in the Chimney Buttes spread, both political and personal, which covers the past and present, an' promises to extend dang well into the future. Jimble-Jaw elected him to office last time, but they's another election comin' off next week. Feller name of Grat Coffey runnin' ag'inst him. 'Spect it'll be plenty *caliente*."

"Can happen. Is the Chimney Buttes layout behind this Coffey?"

"Uh-huh. So's a lot of townfolk, and a good many small spreaders in the Brasada. Grat's a good hombre, and don't scare easy. The boys up on Purgatory are leery of him, and will try hawg tight and bull strong to beat him, natcherly. But I kinda got a hunch that the Post Oak country's gonna put O'Barr back just where he belongs."

"And where's that?" asked a hard-faced man near Slim's left elbow.

"Punchin' cows for a livin'," answered Mulvahill.

The man muttered under his breath, and turned away. Tim Breen glared at Slim, then at Stovall, who had laughed openly at the remark.

"What are you-all jawin' about?" he demanded irritably, his eyes shifting over the crowd of sullen-faced men in the saloon. "I reckon we all better mind our own business."

"Oh, shore!" grinned Slim, draining his glass. "But they ain't no use in callin'

spades anything but spades, 'tween me'n Lightnin', here."

"Then call 'em spades somewheres else, then," retorted Tim Breen, shoving out the bottle. "Fill 'em up, boys."

The operation was interrupted by the return of the sheriff, who clumped in bringing word that Shep Pullen was barely alive, and that was all. The doc held out no hope for him. The men heard the announcement in silence. The sheriff turned to Stovall, hands on hips. His bluster was uncertain.

"And you, stranger, had better pack your war-bag and light a shuck outa here *muy pronto*. If Shep dies, which he shore will, some of his *compadres* will shore pick a fight with you, and sand you out. They don't take kindly to pilgrims coming in here and shootin' up one of their bunkies—not on Purgatory, they don't. So I'm advisin' you to punch the breeze to points distant."

Jess Stovall's mouth twitched in a close-lipped and unpleasant smile.

"Obliged for the tip, Señor Sheriff," he drawled. "But I reckon I'll linger about a day or so, anyhow. Also, I'll trouble you for my gun."

O'Barr hesitated, swore, reluctantly reached for it. "I guess there ain't no law for me keepin' it," he said lamely.

He returned the pistol; Jess flipped the catch and jerked the cylinder open. The sheriff reddened and chewed at his mustache.

"I pitched the cartridges away," he growled, in half apology.

"Why the hell not!" snapped a thick-set, blue-jowled fellow wearing a Boss Stetson and deputy's star. "He's got no call to tote loaded hoglegs in Fort Bend, anyhow. He don't belong here."

Jess Stovall leaned back against the bar and, looking under his hat brim at Helms, the deputy who had spoken, then at Sheriff O'Barr, reached inside his vest and from a shoulder strap took six cartridges and very deliberately reloaded.

"Looks to me like," he remarked impersonally, "this is just the country where cartridges in a gun would be the only way to make it much of a gun." He slid the pistol in its holster, turned to Slim.

"If I remember rightly, we were just startin' to hist a shot of red likker. Confusion to the enemy, *amigo*."

O'Barr's face went livid and his fingers twitched. He swallowed his Adam's apple a couple of times, balled his fists. Helms, the deputy, whirled on his heel with an oath and strode from the saloon. The high sheriff glanced around the room, jerked his head toward a couple of men in signal, headed toward the door.

"I've warned you, stranger," he said thickly. "And I'm callin' on everybody here to remember it, too. I give you fair warnin' to cut stick out of here. If you get smoked up, it'll be yore own fault."

Stovall turned and looked at O'Barr a moment with a slow smile, then went back to his drink. Slim and straight and careless at the bar, the hazy smoke of a brown paper querley coiling about his lean, copper-colored face. The high sheriff slammed the swinging door and tramped out, cursing beneath his breath.

For that smile the Pecos waddy had turned upon him was as deadly a smile as Sheriff O'Barr of Post Oak had ever looked upon.

DUSK had fallen when Stovall, accompanied by Slim Mulvahill, left the Buzzard and took his palomino pony to Piney Sawyer's Mosshorn Livery Stable and Corral, a barnlike building with a high stockade fence behind it, standing at the end of a tortuous little side street. Piney Sawyer, a dried-up, grizzled man, was probably seventy—and looked ninety.

"This is my *amigo*, Jess Stovall," said Slim. "He wants to stable his cayuse, uncle."

"Huh." Piney shifted the cud of plug tobacco in his jaw, spat accurately. "I guess Mr. Stovall don't know you well, Slim. Seems to me I heerd tell of him, an hour or so ago."

"In the evenin' papers, likely," Slim observed serenely. "Where do you want the hoss herded?"

"Third box to the right in the left-hand alley. Next to yore bronc will do. Door's fastened with a piece of balin' wire—don't rip yore hand."

Jess Stovall took Six-Bits, his palo-

mino, in to the roomy, cool, odorous old stable and unsaddled him in the third box stall. Horses nickered, whisked tails, stomped; their steady munching of hay filled the place with its homely sound. Jess rubbed down his mount expertly, saw that he had plenty of feed and water, unstrapped his scabbarded Winchester and left the Mosshorn with a word of thanks to Poney. Slim Mulvahill carried the warbag slung over a shoulder.

"I'm drier than a coyote's hole," said Slim, "and could chaw a hunk of skunk rump. How you feel, Lightnin'?"

"Hungry enough to eat mutton," grinned Jess. "Where's a good chow joint hereabouts?"

"Guess the Chink's is 'bout the best—the Bon Ton. That is, onless you crave pepper-belly cookin'. They's one, two Spig joints here that dish out plenty hot chili and tamales and sich."

"Nope. Steak and spuds and eggs and coffee hit the spot with me tonight. The Chink's it is."

BLUE dusk had deepened, and night had sifted out of the prairies when Jess and Slim entered the Bon Ton and sat at the counter. Fort Bend was opening its doors and lighting its lamps, the yellow bars of light making splashes of ochre on occasional porches. Across the street, in the Longhorn Saloon, a fiddle squeaked a range air, accompanied by a twanging guitar and farther down the main drag an accordion whined wheezily from a cantina. Water gurgled in a hitchrack trough. Three riders came along, their ponies' hoofs sending up quick, muffled echoes.

"Things seem peaceable enough," Jess remarked, as the slant-eyed Chinaman set their meals before them and sidled downcounter. "A fella wouldn't think, right now, they call this place Six-Shooter Junction."

Slim wolfed down a huge hunk of bread, his throat worked and his eyes bulged as he tried to swallow.

"Nobody in town tonight," he replied. "Wait till tomorrow. The Angelina stage'll be in in the evenin', and likely both Henley's and Deever's outfits will hit town then. Prob'ly you'll see then why they call this Six-Shooter Town." He took a big swallow of hot java. "I ain't no scandal peddler," said Slim in a low voice "but I've heerd tell hereabout there's three, four of them Purgatory fellas on Jimble-Jaw's payroll what ain't particular which part of the anatomy, anterior, posterior or longitudinal, they shoot through. If I wuz in yore shoes, Mister Stovall, I'd kinda look sharp 'bout where my suspenders cross."

"Thanks, Slim. I'll just oil my gun and leave her loose in the holster. By the way, you said you were out of a job. Are you stayin' on a while, or ridin'?"

"Dunno just yet. Reckon I'll tarry about a day or two, anyhow. Why? Anything in particular, or just makin' talk?"

"*Nada.* Just wonderin'. Later on this evenin', when we get in a less public place, mebbe we'll *habla* a little about some things."

"*'Sta bueno.* I sabe you didn't drift into Six-Shooter for yore health or the sake of our climate, amigo. And I reckon you give some of them boys in the Buzzard something to think about when you told the high sheriff you were lookin' for ears. That was a purty good joke, Lightnin'."

"And the funny thing about it is that yuh never know just what that joke will be," Jess declared solemnly. "A nice little joke, placed proper, will sometimes get results that would surprise you, Slim."

"I reckon." Slim thoughtfully curled a Bull Durham cigarette, his horse-face unsmiling. "Durned if I ain't got a halfway idear of what you were drivin' at, Lightnin'. "Yeah. And, mebbeso I'll just style along with yuh a little, an' have a look at yore hole card."

Jess Stovall grinned at him.

"Long as you keep to my style it'll be all right," he said.

PAYING their bill, the two left the restaurant. Stovall carrying his scabbarded 30.-30 carelessly slung in the crook of his left arm, Mulvahill lugging the war bag on his left shoulder. Jess Stovall felt the intent, furtive glances of the men in the Bon Ton on the small of

his back as the door swung closed behind him. A sardonic, knowing grin lifted one corner of his mouth as he and Slim went up the board sidewalk toward the Commercial Hotel and Tim Breen's saloon.

The hotel was an adobe building, with a patio in the rear and the bedrooms ranging around its three sides. Three or four men were seated in the office, chairs comfortably tilted back, smoking and chewing tobacco. One of them was talking, his heels resting on a drum stove that had not been lit for several months. But at the entrance of Stovall and Slim he ceased speaking, and the eyes of everyone present slid from Jess to Slim, then back to Stovall again.

"Proprietor in?" asked Stovall.

The florid faced bald-headed man who had one leg without a knee joint, and had been speaking, looked at him without stirring from his comfortable position. "I run this shebang."

"I want a room. Guess if there's an extra bunk in Slim's domicile, I'll squat there."

"Reckon there is. Slim'll show yuh where to roost. Out back and on the right. Wash basin's in the court."

"*Gracias.* Be seein' you later."

After Jess and Slim had left the office for the patio, Luke Darrel, the proprietor of the Commercial House, glanced at his cronies, then shot his jaw forward and meteored tobacco juice through the air.

"That the hombre that gunned Shep this evenin'?" he enquired.

"Uh-huh," grunted the elephantine Doc Satterfield, taking a long and crooked black stogie from his pocket and biting off the end. "And he smote the Hittite pretty severely, I'm statin'." The gigantic man quivered jelly-like with a sinister chuckle. "Unless I'm mightily mistaken, friend Shep's due to go to hell on a shutter for his play. He made one of those mistakes that don't bear repeatin'."

"*Ach, Gott,*" shrugged Heinrich Kothmann, polishing his steel-rimmed spectacles. "And there will be more killings before that black-eyed young pistol shooter sees the last of Fort Bend. I know by his looks."

"Well," remarked a third man soberly, "he's got one foot in the grave, whoever and whatever he is. Mebbe he knows it, an' mebbe not. But there's fellers east of here, without mentionin' no names, that'll be danged proddy to put his other foot in—after today. Yuh say Shep ain't got a chance, Doc?"

"Not a Chinaman's chance. Those three bullets vented plenty of pizen, orneriness, and skulduggery out of his system—yessiree. Gimme a match, Henry."

THE big hanging lamp in the Buzzard was lighted when Jess and Slim entered the saloon. Six or eight loungers sat at the tables against the wall, but the faro layout in the rear was vacant of players, its dealer entertaining himself in a game of solitaire. Tim Breen loafed behind the bar, smoking a twisted cheroot meditatively. It promised to be a quiet night in Six-Shooter Town. Maybe!

After a while Slim left, saying he would return later. Stovall, idling near the front end of the bar, signaled Breen with his head, and Tim loafed slowly up to where he leaned, swabbing at the bar top with his towel as he came.

"Tim," said Jess softly, "I'm lookin' for a fella that's got a mighty remembersome sort of ear."

"Looking friendly, or hostile?" asked Tim.

"Plumb hostile, amigo."

"Then I ain't seen him, and don't know him," said Tim promptly, and fell to mopping off a perfectly dry bartop. "Ain't seen a fella like that a-tall," he repeated, and looked Jess squarely in the eyes.

"Too bad," remarked Stovall, exhaling tobacco smoke. "Yeah. Neither have I seen him—yet. But maybe you've heard about him, Tim?"

"I ain't heard, and don't know nothin'," persisted Breen, his gaze roving restlessly around the room. Jess, critically studying the Irishman through a screen of smoke, read the symptoms easily.

"Far be it from me to hurt yore feelings, amigo," he said pleasantly, "but you're lyin'. And lyin' mighty poorly, at that."

"Maybe," retorted Tim cheerfully, still

mopping. "When a feller comes pokin' his nose into other feller's business, he's like to run up ag'in lies. I got to live here, Jess."

"You shore it ain't my business?" queried Stovall softly.

Tim's eyes wandered again. "Don't know nothin' about that," he mumbled. "But I'm durn' shore it ain't mine. I done told you I've got to live here."

Jess grinned, folded his elbows on the bar.

"I hear Henley's spread of Woodpeckers up on Purgatory are right nice boys and like lots of company," he said abruptly. "That right?"

"Shore." Tim nodded and mopped again. "They ain't right nice boys, and they don't like company. Don't ask me no questions, and don't you pay no attention to my answers, if you do ask 'em." He rolled the stogie in his mouth and cleared his throat like a bear's growl.

"Don't know as I blame you any," said Jess evenly. "Though why any human being would want to live in Fort Bend is past my feeble understandin'. You noticed any funny ears from up Purgatory way?"

"No," said Tim, shaking his head. "I shouldn't wonder if Henley don't like *half-ears* pretty well. On the same side you tote your hogleg."

Jess Stovall blew the ash from his cigarette, straightened slightly.

"*Gracias,*" he said quietly. "I'll be rememberin' that."

TIM moved away to serve a new arrival, and after a few moments came back to the bar-end. He pushed out a bottle to Stovall, who shook his head. "Too soon after chuck. *Poco tiempo.*"

He leaned his elbows on the counter again, while Tim mopped. "Between you, and me, and the mahogany here," asked Jess softly, "what's all the row about down in this neck of the woods? The Woodpecker-Jaybird feud?"

Breen's eyes were sweeping the room through his stogie smoke as he replied in a hoarse whisper.

"Cows! Cows and range and water holes. Puncher-gunslingers rustlin' stock, shooting cows, brandin' any and everything they run across. I ain't sayin' anything, savvy? I ain't takin' sides. One outfit is as bad as the other, and both have got their bunkhouses full of hired killers. If movin' wasn't such a lot of trouble, and so danger oncertain, I'd sell out or pull out. A good many people here are good customers of mine, for the Buckhorn and South Hell ain't healthy places most of the time. They durned shore won't be, tomorrow night."

Jess smiled grimly.

"Pretty lively Saturdays is it?"

"Worsen't that," grimaced Tim. "The Shelbyville stage'll be in, and so'll the Chimney Buttes and Purgatory boys. You'll see. Talk to Slim Mulvahill—he'll give you the low-down on all this. He's a gun-slinger, and don't give a care. And you, Jess, watch the hind side of yore vest."

"Will do, Tim. *Gracias.* How about that snort now?"

"Got a private jug of the best Bourbon you ever put lip to," said Breen moving away.

He spun glasses up the bar, opened a small closet beneath the back-bar, and drew out a bottle half full of red liquor. He had just filled both glasses and replaced the bottle beneath the bar, when the swinging door opened and a man entered the saloon, his spurs clanking on the bare floor. Looking at him through the mirror, Jess saw that he was one of the four poker players who had sat at the table in the Buzzard that afternoon.

He strode to the bar, with a nod of greeting to the scattering of men present, and bellying up near Stovall's left elbow, pushed back his flop-brimmed hat. Tim reached behind him, took a bottle from the mirror stand, spun a glass toward the new arrival.

"On me, Cox," he said. "Fill her up."

"Which is a gent's talk," grinned Cox, pouring the drink. He raised his glass, looked at Stovall, still grinning.

"More confusion to the enemy, amigo," he said. And to Tim Breen, "Mud in yore eye, old-timer."

Jess Stovall studied the man frankly. Cox was an oldish sort of person, all of fifty-odd, dressed in range garb, with grizzled hair, weather-seamed face and cold blue eyes. He had witnessed

the shooting of Shep Pullen that afternoon, and had helped Stovall out a lot by giving Sheriff O'Barr a precise, if profane, account of the happening. He was, like Slim Mulvahill, a man whom Jess instinctively liked.

"My name's Hardy Cox, Mister Stovall," he announced without preamble. "You very busy this evenin'?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"The old man would like to see you. The boss, Anse Mather of the Lazy-M. He's over at the hotel. I'm his foreman."

"What's he want to see me about?" asked Stovall shortly, curling a cigarette, his senses alert. He wasn't walking into any foxy traps this night—not with his eyes open.

"Dunno," shrugged the foreman. "But I wish you'd go see him. Tim, here, can tell you about the boss."

"Yeah," rumbled Tim, polishing a glass. "A good man and a square shooter. Runs the Lazy-M outfit over on Button Willow Crick, south of the Navisad. Better stroll over, Jess, and see what he wants with yuh."

"Bueno," said Stovall, hitching up his belt. "If Slim comes before I get back, tell him to hang around for me, Tim."

"I'll stroll down the street with yuh, and show you the old man's room," said Hardy Cox. "I'm ready when you are."

As he and the Lazy-M foreman walked down the main drag of Fort Bend, Jess Stovall was thinking swiftly. He had come to Six-Shooter Town with a definite purpose in mind, and thanks to the left-handed remarks of Tim, he believed he had a pretty good lead in locating his quarry. A man over Bandera way, two weeks past, had told him enough about a certain party in the Navisad strip to warrant his long journey; Jess believed that certain party to be on Jimble-Jaw Henley's payroll. He didn't know what Anse Mather, with whom he wasn't acquainted, wanted with him, but he was going to soon find out.

They turned into the Commercial House, walked through the office, where the group of men still idled and talked, and crossed the patio to room ten. Cox drummed with his knuckles on the door, then pushed it open and entered, Stovall at his heels.

Old Anse Mather was seated in a rawhide bottom rocking chair, holding a gnarled dogwood cane in his right hand. He was a big man, and heavy, well over sixty, with a mane of shaggy, grizzled hair covering a leonine head, and a seamed face matted with a growth of heavy, salt-and-pepper whiskers. Gray eyes, the color of a shark's belly, gleamed from beneath shaggy brows, and were fixed in a piercing gleam upon Stovall as he entered the room and nodded greeting.

"Stovall?" rumbled Old Anse, in a voice like a grizzly's. "Glad to meetcha, an' glad yuh come. Want to jaw with yuh a little. Sit down and get the weight off yore feet. Hardy, you c'n take a pasear outside, an' see that any curious long-ears ain't got their lobes to the keyhole."

The foreman grinned and left, carefully shutting the door behind him, while old Anse puffed at a black cigar and openly studied Stovall through the cloud of smoke. He reached for his vest pocket. "Have a stogie?"

"No thanks," Jess refused hastily. "I need my health, Mister Mather."

"Unh," grunted old Anse. "Men nowadays is weaklin's. In my time . . . but let it go. I'll git down to brass tacks, and deal the cyards from the top. It ain't my habit to hem-an'-haw, or beat about the bush. Now—what you doin' here in Six-Shooter, young fellow? I know it ain't a danged bit of my business, but I'm askin' anyhow. Directly you'll see why."

Jess built a brownie thoughtfully. "Why, I'm just cruising around the Strip a little. Heard a lot of this country, and thought I'd come and have a squint at it."

"Humph. Don't sound natural to me. Don't lie, young feller. But that ain't neither here or there. I heerd all about you layin' out Shep Pullen in the Buzzard this evenin'. And Shep was plumb pizen with his shootin' irons—one of Henley's high-ace leadslingers. Come from over No'th Carolina way a coupla years back, finally drifted here."

Old Anse turned the man-killing cigar over in his mouth, his face sober, and eyes hard as agates as they bored into Stovall.

"That shootin' scrape ain't goin' to make you many friends this side of the Navisad, son," he said grimly. "The Woodpecker's

gun-slingin' crew will be layin' for you."

"Reckon so," said Jess quietly, tapering off his querley. He touched a match to its tip without further observation.

"Will yore bizness here interfere with yuh takin' on a job with the Lazy-M for a week or ten days?" the old man asked abruptly.

"What kind of job?" queried Jess, smiling. "Mendin' fences, or wrasslin' dogies?"

"Ridin' a bit of line over toward San Saba Canyon," snapped the old rancher. "An' also ridin' more line right here in Six-Shooter. They's an election comin' off next Tuesday, and this is Friday. My spread ain't big—eighteen hundred head or so, with three punchers includin' Cox, my foreman. But my grant dates back to this country's first settlement, an' a good many people hereabouts listen kinda respectful-like when I talk."

Jess blew tobacco smoke hard on the glowing tip of his cigarette. "I'd like to ask you some questions, Mister Mather," he said slowly. "Just so I can get the lay of this country, and this Woodpecker-Jaybird feud. I guess you're lined up with one side or the other?"

SMOKE almost obscured Mather's bearded face, but Jess saw the fitful gleam in the bleak eyes as they drilled into him. "My spread lays right between Tate Deever's and Mark Henley's in a pie-shaped wedge, right up ag'in the hills. I bin right nootral up to date. Neither one of 'em's bothered me much till now. But lately some of my stock's been missin'—'specially young calves whose maws have been shot and skint. I won't say who's doin' it, cause I don't know for certain, an' I ain't mentionin' no names without proof. An' proof's what I'm after."

The great chest rose and the dogwood cane banged against the floor irritably.

"Some polecats hereabouts know that I'm supportin' Grat Coffey for high sheriff of Post Oak in the comin' election. An' old Tate Deever is supportin' him, too. O'Barr, the present incumbent, is a jack-in-the-box of Henley's, an' Jimble-Jaw pulls the strings. Some of us small spread ranchers is gettin' danged good and tired of it, an' come out open for Coffey, who's a good hombre for a peace officer even if he is tough and ornery as chuck beef, an' a two-gun leadslinger. An' pretty soon, after we come out for Grat, things begin happenin' to our stock, an' fences, an' hayricks. It don't take no soothsayer to add up that two an' two."

"Not hardly," smiled Stovall. "But what's the scrap between the Diamond Tail and Purgatory outfits, Mister Mather?"

IT was a familiar story. Both Henley and Deever were old time cattlemen, established figures with immense holdings in the Brasada Country, and for a number of years had got along without trouble. Then they had had a break—a break caused by greed for water holes and grass range, and aggravated by throwing long ropes.

The feud divided families, disrupted business houses, festered like a carbuncle in the frontier town beside the Navisad. Tough hombres and two-gun men drifted in, took sides. Fort Bent had quickly become a cess-pool of lawlessness and iniquity. A strip of Texas where Sunday stopped at the Angelina.

And range hell began.

Mark Henley's spread was called the Woodpeckers, Tate Deever's the Jaybirds. No one could give any particular reason for these names, but they stuck. Henley, with his partisans, the small fry ranchers, nesters and squatters, as well as his cohorts in Six-Shooter Town, had been able to elect their sheriff by a small plurality in the last election; old Tate Deever hoped to wipe out that small margin the coming Tuesday and install a new law officer. The next several days promised to outdo the past in lawlessness.

There was a short silence in the room when old Anse Mather had finished. Jess Stovall tapered off a new querley before speaking. "Thanks," he said quietly. "I been wonderin' about a lot of things since I come here. And I see some of those things pretty plain now, Mister Mather. Do you know Slim Mulvahill, late of the Diamond Tail?"

"Uh-huh. A top-hand all around, even if he is ornery as a bull rattler an' a likker-hound. Got any reason for askin' why I know him?"

"Yeah, some. I was just wonderin' if you could use a couple of hands on the

Leanin'-M, instead of one. Said Slim being the other."

"Why—" old Anse hesitated, surprised. "Why, yeah, I reckon so. What you drivin' at, son? You hooked up with Slim?"

"Kinda." Jess leaned forward, rubbed his palms together briskly, stood up.

"You've put yore cards square on the green, Mister Mather," he said evenly. "An' I'm sorry I can't play mine likewise, not just now. I'm here for a special purpose, as you've guessed. It may be that I can tend to that, and help you out a little at the same time. I'll see you early in the mornin'. That be all right, sir?"

"Uh-huh. I like yore looks, young feller. Level and sound headed, an' yuh don't wear that sidewinder pistol for ornament. There's not ary other man hereabouts that totes a left hand gun, solo, that I knows of. Come around in the mawnin', if yuh see yore way clear to sign on my payroll, an' bring Slim with yuh. I'm stove up with rheumatism, an' can't get about much. . . . It's hell to see the end of the trail right ahead, son."

"I'd say you've got several good kicks left in your system yet," grinned Jess as he moved toward the door.

Jess said good-night to the lounging Hardy Cox in the patio gallery, and left the courtyard. In the hotel office the knot of talkers had been increased by one, Slim Mulvahill.

He uncoiled his lanky frame from a chair as Jess came in, got to his feet. Doc Satterfield, old Kothmann the saddler, Luke Darrel the hotel proprietor, all looked at Stovall curiously. Jess, who had started to leave the hotel office and walk up the street, sensed the strange glances bent upon him, and his black eyes flicked about the group of faces.

Slim didn't give him a chance to say anything. He caught hold of Stovall's arm, and gently but firmly guided him into an about face, without seemingly doing so. Jess was surprised, but caught on at once. Slim yawned widely, hunched his rangy shoulders.

"How 'bout hittin' the hay?" he said to Jess. "Yuh kinda feel like sleepin' after that long ride don'tcha?"

"Uh-huh. Any old time, fella. You sprung a good suggestion."

"Yeah. Well, we'll bid you gents a fond *buenas noches,* then. See yuh in the mawnin'."

They walked back across the patio without speaking, nor was a word said until Slim had locked the door of their room, and securely fastened the shutter of the high, narrow window in the 'dobe wall. Jess lit the lamp on the board table, shucked down the blanket on his rough bunk. Slim, casting an approving eye over his precautionary arrangements, sat down on his own bed and twisted a cigarette, dangling the tobacco sack from his mouth by holding the drawstrings with his teeth as he rolled the smoke.

"Just been over to the Buckhorn, an' Little South Hell," he drawled. "Kep' my ears open, too. They's two, three vinegaroons around here what makes a shot or a knife in the back their chosen pleasantry, 'specially after dark. I thought mebbe you could use a night's shut-eye, everything bein' sich as it is."

"You got a head on yore shoulders, Slim," smiled Jess, pulling off his boots. "How'd you like to go to work for old man Mather a matter of a week or so? Startin' tomorrow."

"Don't usually start to workin' 'til I get broke," said Mulvahill after a pause. "But if *you're* signin' on with Anse—why, mebbe that's different. Figgerin' on settin' yore John Henry down on his payroll?"

"Uh-huh. Mebbeso. Know for sure in the mornin'. Jess ground out his cigarette stub in a cracked saucer on the table. "How come you didn't want me to take a *pasear* tonight along the street?" he asked curiously. "Some of the dry gulchin' citizenry got designs upon my pore carcass?"

Slim Mulvahill's horse face was sober as he looked at Stovall. He shucked off his blue shirt before answering.

"Shep Pullen kicked out 'bout half an hour ago," he said quietly.

MARK HENLEY, better known to the citizenry of the Navisad Strip and Brasada country as Jimble-Jaw, was seated on the edge of a rough board table in the front room of his adobe ranch house. Some twenty-odd men, punchers and gunmen from the bunkhouses down by the

pole corrals, were ringed around the walls or squatted on the floor, eying their boss in silence. The day was Saturday, the hour shortly after sun-up, and the salty looking assemblage knew that the owner of the Purgatory spread had something out of the ordinary on his mind.

He stared at them and they waited.

Henley was a peculiar looking man—a man that strangers would be inclined to turn around and stare at—if Henley didn't see them doing it. His sun and wind burned visage was graven into many fine lines; his nose, broken at the tip, hooked inward to perpetuate a sardonic expression that would remain with him until death. His eyes, black as soot and brilliant as polished agates, looked out from beneath shaggy brows; his head, save for a ring of sparse, salt-and-pepper hair above the ears, was bald as a billiard ball. His tall frame was scrawny and bony and unsubstantial, his back slightly hunched.

On his right jaw bone, midway between chin and ear, the skin was stippled into a spiderweb by a gunshot wound, and a huge wen had formed in its center. It made a grotesquerie of his face and features, drawing them sidewise, and gave him the nickname of Jimble-Jaw. His features were curiously sphinxlike, all save the eyes. There was about them a constant twitching—the eyeballs moved ceaselessly from side to side; keen, suspicious, penetrating.

"Men," he said harshly, "rumors of dirty business in Six-Shooter has come to my ears. I guess you-all have heard of it from Bandy and the other boys that was present—'bout the shooting of Shep yesterday.

"Seems like Shep thought this stranger was a fella named 'One-Two' Lusk, a gun fanner which is bein' brought in by Deever, but Breen says different. 'Pears like he knows this hombre—I don't recollect his monicker just now. It don't make no difference 'bout that. The thing is—he *might* hire on with Deever's outfit, unless we take steps to see that he ain't able to. It'a'd' took a danged fast man with his hoglegs to down Shep—this hombre must be plenty quick."

Banty Lunt said, "He is. A side-winder shooter—carried a left-hand iron. An' I reckon, also, he totes a hideout under his arm—from the way he loaded up when O'Barr give him back his gun."

"Well," said Henley slowly, "I guess we'll hafta make a permanent citizen outa him. And next Tuesday's election time. We've got to keep O'Barr in office, or Grat Coffey'll be servin' warrants on a lot of you boys. I guess there's three, four of yuh that won't exactly cotton to the idea of a penitentiary, or dancin' from a hemp necktie."

The assemblage of hand picked killers grunted, glowered, shuffled their feet. Hard looking cases they were—men who wore their guns thonged to their hips, thin of lip and cold of eye. Salty hombres hailing from Texas, New and Old Mexico, Oklahoma—men who were wanted for almost every crime on the calendar. Killing was their occupation. The inside of a jail, or the cottonwood prance, certainly didn't appeal to them. Henley grinned evilly around the ring of black, scowling faces.

"We're ridin' to town this mornin'," he announced, getting to his feet. "There might be a coupla Rangers, or a Federal marshal in on the stage, bein' next Tuesday's what it is. We'll hafta keep our eyes skinned for them fellers. And . . . about this stranger who rid in on the palomino—I ain't advisin' yuh none, understand—but he shore played hell with Shep."

"Some of the fellers in town mighta breshed into him before now," cut in the scarred faced Lew King, with a wink at the group of muttering men. "Lonzo stayed in town last night."

"And again," added a pock-faced Mexican, "they mebbe not. We will see."

"Yeah," nodded Jimble-Jaw, motioning them outside. "We'll see. And be damned shore you see first. Git your cayuses saddled, hombres. We're ridin' pronto."

JESS STOVALL was up early that Saturday morning. The sun had barely cleared the mass of wooded scarps and coulees east of town when he and Slim, after an eye-opener at Tim Breen's, finished breakfast at the Chink's. Stovall started for the Mosshorn Corral to see about his pony, and was to meet Mulvahill in half an hour. He walked rather warily that morning, for Slim had cautioned him be-

fore leaving the hotel. He turned corners widely, and looked many ways at once, his gun slippery in its holster.

But when trouble came, it broke with such unexpected swiftness that he was almost killed without knowing what had hit him.

He had almost reached the livery barn, and was passing the 'dobe-walled corral flanking it, when he heard a short grunt and a heavy double thud in the sand behind him. He pivoted in a sidewise crouch, pistol twinkling into his left hand.

There had not been a soul in sight, anywhere, a second before, except old Piney Sawyer sitting in front of the stable door. Now two men were in the road behind him—two men who had dropped from the corral wall. And as Stovall turned, a stab of hot lead flamed across his cheek, searing the flesh, and the man firing was loosing a second shot.

Jess thumbed the hammer three times as he dove flat onto the sand. He fired with more speed than accuracy, trying to jim-up the aim of his assailants, for the second man had been only an instant behind his *compadre* in cutting loose. But his second and third shots knocked little puffs of dust from the shirt of the first drygulcher, and he went down with a grunt flat on his stomach, sprawled out like a wad of thrown away clothes, the pistol spinning from his fingers.

A bullet from number two nicked Stovall's left ear lobe, another almost parted his black hair, leaving a tingling across his scalp. And with a savage concentration in his swarthy face the man was firing a third time. It knocked a heel off of Stovall's boot as he hurled himself over in a tumbleweed roll, loosing a desperate snap shot as he did so.

A snap shot—but a lucky one. The dried rabbit's-foot that Jess Stovall always carried in his left vest pocket still held its lucky charm. The bullet struck the second bushwhacker in the belly, and with a scream like a wild animal he clapped both hands to his middle, his body jackknifing as his knees buckled. The shot he was loosing went wild, thudding into the 'dobe wall of the corral above Stovall's head.

Jess fired the last cartridge in his gun as the man bent double, and the fellow pitched sideways with a strangled cry, landing heavily on a shoulder, his legs threshing.

Men were running down the streets now, converging from several directions at once. Jess swiftly reloaded as he lay upon the ground on his right side, bareheaded; his face and neck bloody. Snapping the breech of his gun, and still holding it in his hand, he scrambleed to his feet. He was breathing rapidly.

He picked up his black sombrero and put it on without dusting the dirt from it or from his clothes. His narrowed eyes flicked about the crowd of approaching men, cold and hard as polished agates.

SID HELMS, Sheriff O'Barr's chunky blue-jawed deputy, was among the first on the scene. He glanced flashingly down at the two dead men, then at Jess, and there was an odd blankness about his cold slate eyes. His Colt was in his hand, but Stovall's gun also was in his. Helms' lips writhed upward in a snarl—evidenly he was undecided whether or not Stovall's gun was empty, and hesitated to throw down on him. Jess merely looked at him, motionless and watchful; and Helms knew that Stovall knew he was figuring his chances to kill him. The Pecos man's slight smile was edged with an ugliness and chill that was unmistakable.

With an oath Helms holstered his pistol, flashed another look at the casualties, took a step toward Stovall, whose back was against the corral wall. Panting men were pounding up every moment, now.

"What's coming off here?" rasped the deputy hoarsely, his furious eyes on Stovall. "You shoot these men?"

"No," said Jess in an icy voice. "They died of heart failure from hoppin' off the corral wall—*behind me.*"

Someone chuckled.

"Let me see yore gun," said Helms, advancing again.

Jess elevated the muzzle a couple of inches, directly in line with Helms' bellyband. "You're lookin' at it right now, *hombrecito,*" he said in the same tone of voice, and the ghost of a smile beneath those ruthless eyes jerked the deputy up like a taut rope. Helms fell back a step.

"And if you do any more movin' in my direction," finished Jess, "the lead in

this hogleg will melt itself together runnin' through you, little man."

Helms' face paled. "Resistin' arrest, huh?" he said thickly. "I'm callin' on you fellers present to swear that this hombre threw his gun on me—"

"Oh, dry up!" cut in grizzled old Hardy Cox, Anse Mather's foreman. He stood to one side, hands on hips, regarding the scene. "What's happened here, Stovall?"

Briefly, Jess told his tale, gun still in hand. Trickles of blood ran down his cheek and dripped from the nicked ear as he talked. And when he finished, a dolorous-faced man standing nearby, whittling at a soft piece of wood with a huge jackknife, took up the tale before anybody had a chance to say anything. A stoop-shouldered, saggy-jowled, tobacco chewing man with a droopy mustache, garbed in shabby clothes and boots.

"That's the way it wuz," he stated in a harsh, metallic voice. "Me, I wuz a-sleepin' in my waggin in the corral. But as some o' ye know, an' others may yit find out, I sleep wi' one eye a while, then wi' the tother. I heard these two fellers"—jerking a thumb toward the dead men—"a-talkin' in the corral, an' seen 'em a-peekin' an' peekin' over the fence. Reckon they thought I wuz sleepin' off a drunk. I wa'nt—I don't sleep off my drunks."

"Talk, you," gritted Helms. "Talk and quit jawin' so much."

THE melancholy man closed his jackknife and dropped it into a pocket, his yellowish eyes fixed in unwavering stare upon the deputy. He spat deliberately before continuing, not missing Helms' toes a great distance. Somebody snickered. Helms flushed.

"As I wuz sayin'," continued the man, "them two fellers hopped off'n the wall, an' cut loose on this young wrangler, here. An' from behind him, too. I had snuk up to see what wuz what—an' I seen the whole shebang, friends an' mule skinners. Bullets wuz a-zippin' around him like heel flies aroundst a spavined mare—an' him a-layin' on the ground, his hawglaig a-spittin' back at 'em. An', by juggy, he downed 'em both! Piney Sawyer, here, he seen the whole thing, same as I did."

Old Piney, chewing tobacco like a chipmunk gnaws a nut, nodded his head and exactly corroborated both accounts of the affray. He had been sitting in front of his stable—in a grandstand seat.

"Huh!" grunted Sid Helms. "That's Lonzo Padget and Cole Denger. I never heard about neither one of them tryin' to bushwhack a stranger!"

"'Spect they's several things you ain't heerd about—yit," added the melancholy man softly. "But mebbe over in Shelbyville we hear more things than yuh do down here in Six-Shooter."

"Shut up," snarled Helms, glaring at the yellow-eyed man. "The best thing you can do is pack that blasted wagon of yores, and pull yore freight outa here."

"Uh-huh," said the man calmly. "Mebbeso I'd better. They wuz a coupla Rangers in Shebyville 'tother day when I left. 'Pears like I hearn one of 'em say they wuz aimin' to perambulate over this direction. I got no hankerin' to be present when them gents begin pepperin' the chaparral with their hawglaigs an' Winchesters."

Helms opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind and looked at Sheriff O'Barr, who had arrived in the meanwhile. Slim Mulvahill had also joined the group, and stood close to Jess Stovall, who, his gun reholstered, was wiping his face with a blood-soaked handkerchief.

"A fine come-off!" grated the sheriff, looking at the dead men. "I reckon young Padget had it in for you, stranger, because you killed Shep yesterday. Padget was one of his *compadres.* Cole Denger musta been, too, though I didn't know it. But I warned yuh yesterday about this."

Stovall was looking at the dead men. One was a fellow he had never seen before—a thickset man, all muscle, with a square head and shock of tow hair, and a hard, swarthy face partly black from scrubby beard. He was the first man Jess had knocked over.

The other was the sun-dried young hairpin with the dead-shad eyes who had accused Jess of shooting Pullen unfairly in the Buzzard the previous evening. Lonzo Padget, a rider for the Purgatory outfit. He had a bullet through his belly, and another through his throat. Neither

bushwhacker would ever move again of their own volition.

"There'll hafta be a inquest, I guess," grumbled the sheriff. "Might as well hold it the same time we do Shep's this mornin'. Sid, you see that these fellers are moved; Stovall, you better come along up to the doc's office, and get patched up. Gosh! You ain't been here twenty-four hours yet, and you done marked off three men! Somethin's got to be done about it! I can't jug you for shootin' 'em, in the face of all the evidence—but I'm durned shore I can jug you for disturbin' the peace."

"Not any," put in Hardy Cox swiftly. "He wasn't disturbin' no peace until these two sidewinders tried to drygulch him. You'll have to get a better one than that, Mister Sheriff."

"And I've got it!" exclaimed O'Barr triumphantly. "He's a durned vagrant, without no means of support. A drifter, and he c'n shore be calaboosed for that, *Mister* Cox! You come along with me to the judge, Stovall. And Mulvahill, too. He's in the same boat you're in."

"Come again, Señor Sheriff," Jess Stovall drawled, twisting and licking a querley into shape. With the match flaring in his fingers he paused.

"Didn't yuh know that both Slim and me signed on with Mr. Anse Mather's Lazy-M outfit last night?" he asked gently. "Well, well!"

THE inquest, held some forty-five minutes later, in Doc Satterfield's bailiwick, was nothing but a formality. Old Judge Norvell, Justice of the Peace, presided, pawing at his thin little beard and industriously chewing tobacco. The puffing, elephantine Doc Satterfield gave his testimony between puffs at the reeking stogie in his mouth.

Stovall told his story briefly, followed by "Sad Sim" Blount, the Shelbyville freighter, and Uncle Piney Sawyer, Hardy Cox, Tim Breen, Slim Mulvahill and one or two others gave evidence as to the shooting of Shep Pullen the previous afternoon. There was no coroner's jury. Judge Norvell rendered a decision of justifiable homicide—in a manner that denoted he had rendered many such decisions—and the inquest was adjourned.

Mosley Horn, the County Attorney, a big, gaunt, cadaverous looking man with pale features and an eagle's beak of a nose, regarded Jess very steadily indeed as the inquest adjourned.

"It seems to me, young man," he said grimly, "that for a stranger, you're taking a very active part in our community life. If this keeps up, I'm afraid the County Attorney's office will have to take some action in the matter."

Jess Stovall looked levelly at him from under his hat brim, not answering. A faint flush stole over Horn's pale features, a sort of film passed over his slightly protuberant eyes. He turned away, and Jess left the office with Slim Mulvahill, Tim Breen and Hardy Cox.

Stovall was in an ugly mood that morning. The doc had patched up his sliced cheek and nicked ear, and both burned like hell-fire. Also his belly was sore as a boil where Pullen's bullet had driven the belt buckle against it, and his left elbow was skinned raw from his swift and precipitous dive to the ground that morning. Yes, Jess Stovall was much on the prod that sunshiny Saturday morning.

But despite his ringiness, he realized fully the danger that was every place about him. A bullet in the back seemed to be Six-Shooter Town's chosen pleasantry so far as he was concerned. He knew, better than any other, that if it hadn't been for his pantherish agility, plus his uncanny gun-wizardry he would have right then been stretched out to cool in the shack behind Satterfield's office.

Denger, he learned, was a loafer around town—a hard customer who trained with the Purgatory spread, and hung about Little South Hell. Without doubt the fellow was in Henley's pay, as were quite a few other gents of no visible means of support who frequented Fort Bend. Lonzo Padget, of coursee, had been a rider for Jimble-Jaw, same as Shep Pullen.

Men looked hard at Stovall as he walked up the street toward the Buzzard, but beyond colorless nods to the trio, said nothing. Just outside the Commercial Hotel, they ran into old Anse Mather, hobbling up the street on his dogwood walking stick.

"We're reportin' for work—Slim and me," said Jess shortly. "What's the or-

ders yuh got for us, Mister Mather?"

Old Anse looked narrowly at him from under shaggy brows, rolled the stogie in his mouth. "I orter send yuh hot footin' for the Lazy-M," he growled, "fast as yore cayuses could travel, dang yuh! But"—he grinned faintly—"don't reckon I will, son. Likely lotsa people'll be in town today, and it's Saturday. So—you'n Slim just hang around, and entertain yoreselves. I guess Pete and Harl and Gomez c'n look after things till we git back, huh, Hardy?"

"Shore," grinned the grizzled foreman. "Reckon Gomez'll hafta do most of the lookin' out by himself this evenin', for I'll bet my saddle that Pete and Harl'll be in town by twelve o'clock. Gomez," he said, turning to Jess and Slim, "is the spig cook."

"Have a drink with us, Mister Mather?" invited Stovall, as they started on upstreet.

"Nope," refused old Anse. "I gotta see a few fellers this mawnin'. Ain't got time. Mebbeso I'll run ag'in you waddies later, an' take up that proposition. S'long."

Not once had he mentioned the shooting of Padget and Denger.

As the morning wore on riders came into Fort Bend from all directions, singly, or in small groups. It was Saturday, and pay-day—the saloons and gambling houses and cribs would do a lively business. At one o'clock the Angelina stage was due, and that also was an event. Jess Stovall and Slim Mulvahill strolled around town a while, then returned to the Buzzard as the sun began bearing down. It promised to be hot as blazes after noon.

It was while they were walking around that Jess saw Grat Coffey, the candidate for high sheriff. A tall man of stalwart physique, long of arm and supple of hip, with a hard, cold blue eye and sandy mustache, reddish-bronze complexion and catlike tread. He wore two guns, thonged low, and carried a suspicious looking bulge just left of his belt buckle that looked like the haft of a Bowie knife.

"Good work, cowboy!" he nodded to Stovall as he passed them, then continued on down the street without looking back. Jess, who hadn't seen him before, glanced back, hesitating, when Slim told him who the man was.

"The next high sheriff of Brasada," he finished with a grin. "If yuh can kill off three, four more of Jimble-Jaw's lead-slingers, I *know* he'll be it!"

SIX-SHOOTER TOWN from all outward appearances didn't seem like a place of feud and violence and sudden death that Saturday at eleven o'clock. The Texas sun shone brightly from a cloudless sky, bathing the town and its shirttail purlieus in stinging, golden light; horses stood at hitchracks, stamping or swishing their tails at flies; men in the garb of Rangeland conversed in front of stores and saloons, on sidewalks and in the street, laughing and jesting. The tawny Navisad flowed sluggishly between its wooded, high bluffed banks of cottonwood and sycamore, salt cedar and willow; beyond spread the hazy, gray-green expanse of mesquite and greasewood, catclaw and chaparral, with the heat waves shimmering over it and the road to Angelina coiling into it like a dirty gray ribbon. Behind this dun expanse rose the ragged outlines of the Chimney Buttes, high up on the horizon and clear-cut in the morning light.

And east of town, beyond a level stretch of 'squite flat, rose the buttes and canyons and broken country of the Purgatory range, the whole dominated by the towering, humpbacked pinnacle of Packsaddle mountain. A wild, rough region, over there. Dense thickets, deep coulees, brush matted swales. The scream of the panther was heard there, the squall of the wildcat, the bark of the jaguar. Deer and turkey and wild hog and cattle ran among the brakes and wooded bluffs. It was Jimble-Jaw's domain, the abode of the Woodpeckers, just as the sloping, lush-grass plain spreading away west and southwest of the river to the fingers of Chimney Buttes belonged to Deever's Diamond-Tail spread, and his Jaybirds.

But Jess Stovall had no eyes for the scenery that morning. A cold, implacable purpose was burning inside him—the purpose and desire to meet a certain hombre he had reason to believe was on Henley's payroll. Just as soon as he could finish the business that brought him from the Pecos to the Brasada, he was going to pull his freight. And he intended to

wind up that business at the first opportunity. If said opportunity was slow in coming, he intended to make that opportunity himself.

It was exactly ten minutes past eleven, that morning, when Mark Henley and his cavalcade of horsemen rode out of the mesquite flat, and entered the eastern end of Six-Shooter Town's main street.

At the same hour and minute, several miles distant beyond Two Burros Crossing below town, a dust cloud on the Angelina road advertised a large band of horsemen approaching Fort Bend from the direction of Chimney Buttes.

Doc Satterfield and old Kothmann the saddler, again seated in the latter's workshop, saw. And once more the little German got up and carefully closed the shutters.

"I expect Six-Shooter will show its wolf teeth today, Henry," yawned the doctor. "They'd better hurry up and plant Shep and his two amigos under Boot Hill, so's to make room for the forthcoming casualties in the cooling shack."

"Himmel!" clucked old Heinrich, busily stitching on a boot. "If I were not so old, I would move to another more peaceful town to spend my remaining days. Such a business, *ach!*"

Doc Satterfield, who had been hearing that for several years, felt in his vest pocket for a match.

"Hope I don't have any pressing engagements right away," he said with a sinister chuckle. " 'Cause the cracks in those shutters will give me a right peart view of what's going to happen here before the sun cuts the dip of those Chimney Buttes this evenin'. Gimme a match, Henry.

Jess Stovall, standing at the end of Tim Breen's bar next to the street door, watched Henley and his henchmen ride past en route to their hangout, the Little South Hell saloon and gambling house. And he counted twenty-seven of them all armed. They rode their horses at a walk, and they rode in silence—a sinister, ominous silence. Save for the squeak of saddle leather, and the clop of hoofs, it might have been a funeral.

Jess narrowly scanned each face as they passed, his eyes expressionless. Jimble-Jaw was mounted on a cold-black horse, and wore a Stetson just as sooty. His disfigured, hawkish face was blank as an Indian's, only the eyeballs twitching ceaselessly from side to side. A black butted six-shooter swung at his hip, and he wore gloves.

As the last rider disappeared beyond Stovall's range of vision, he swore under his breath. The man he was looking for was not among the riders, or else his eyes were not what they once were. But inside the Pecos waddie was that restless, nagging sense of prophecy, a hunch. He felt that his man was on the Purgatory payroll. He played his hunches, just as he carried the dried talisman in his left vest pocket. Nine times out of ten his hunches turned out to be right. Would this be the tenth time?

"See anybody?" asked Slim, in a low voice, at his elbow.

Jess shook his head. "That all of Henley's crew?" he asked.

"Nuh-uh. Likely more be in this evenin'. Mebbe ole 'ears' will turn up with the others—then ag'in, mebbe he's heerd of yuh bein' here, and gone over the mountain."

Stovall cursed, turned away, began rolling a cigarette. "He done that once," he said quietly, "and I don't aim for him to repeat."

He walked outside, stood there at the edge of the board sidewalk, watching the band of horsemen dismount at the Little South Hell hitchracks. Fort Bend seemed to have turned strangely silent. Where before the streets had been fairly populous with conversing and leisurely moving people, now they seemed almost deserted with very few men moving about. Most of the Purgatory spread entered the saloon, but some dozen of them scattered in different directions, walking with apparent aimlessness.

Jess Stovall smiled thinly. Like outposts and guards on the prowl, those. A force superior to officers, and ready to resist officers, should any appear against them. He hitched up his cartridge belt, gave a shrug of his left shoulder. There, under his shirt on a wide leather cross-belt, was a cleverly contrived holster sewed to the belt, in which hung a .38 pistol. A pistol that very few people knew was there.

Well, likely he would need it this day, he reflected grimly. For he hadn't the slightest doubt but that quite a number of Henley's salty-looking killers were already looking for him with slippery holsters. By now they would have heard of the rubbing out of Lonzo Padget and Cole Denger that morning.

"Want to stroll around some?" Jess asked Slim carelessly.

"Suits me," nodded Mulvahill, who now wore two bone-handled guns on a full cartridge belt, instead of the single weapon he had been carrying. "I just been readin' sign, amigo—an' it says, 'Look out for storms.'" He hitched up his heavy belt on his lanky hips. "All right, I got my lightnin' protectors right here—Colt's patent lightnin' rods. Let 'er rip."

THEY started down the street, walking easily, alert and swift eyed. Little South Hell was on the opposite side of the main drag, in the second block down, on a corner; the Commercial Hotel was in the same block, catercornered across the street. In front of the hotel, Jess and Slim met Hardy Cox, who was talking to a couple of cowmen.

"Where are you fellows headin'?" asked the grizzled foreman of the Lazy-M, curiously. His slaty eyes flicked toward the saloon across the caliche roadway, with a hidden warning in their squinted depths.

"Just taking a little *pasear* around," said Stovall. "To see what we can see."

"Uh-huh. Ain't no use in rilin' up the animules onnecessarily, there?" queried Cox, twisting a brownie.

"Nope. We ain't." Jess glanced about him carelessly. "Just lookin' around."

"Yeah," grunted Cox dryly. "Just lookin' around. I've seen enough of you, Stovall, to know that you can take care of yoreself in pretty near any company, but you're plumb flirtin' with the undertaker now. This ain't gonna be any Sunday school picnic in Six-Shooter today, fellers."

Jess grinned, and kept on down the street toward the stage station. After half a block he turned to Mulvahill, and looked him in the eye.

"Cox's right, Slim," he said quietly. "It ain't goin' to be a Sunday school picnic you're settin' out on with me. You've really got no call to get mixed up in this."

"Huh!" grunted Slim. "Don't get loco now, Lightnin'. I never did care for no Sunday school picnics—that's why I left home, sweet home for this ornery malpais called the Brasada. Let her storm, cowboy! I like my happenings to come early, soon and often."

"You're goin' to have the time of yore gay young life with them, then, compadre," quoth Jess Stovall. "Confusion to the enemy!"

"Wanta drink to that over in Little South Hell?" asked Slim.

"A good idea, son," nodded Jess solemnly. "A plumb good idea."

And they kept on downstreet toward the stage station with Slim, his floppy sombrero tilted, rakishly over one eye, jauntily whistling:

Oh, there ain't no hoss that can't be rode,
An' there ain't no man that can't be throwed—

BUT it seemed that their resolve to drink the toast in the lion's den across the *caliche* was not to be fulfilled just yet. For a big band of horsemen was entering Fort Bend from the hill above Two Burros ford on the Navisad—horsemen, riding in column of twos, some thirty-odd of them. A grin spread over Mulvahill's homely features as he saw them.

"Behold the Señor of Chimney Buttes, an' his spread of Diamond-Tail rattlers," he announced to Stovall. "Ole Tate Deever and his buskys."

Jess and Slim stopped at the edge of the sidewalk to watch the cavalcade pass en route to the Longhorn Saloon, which was in the block above South Hell, at an angle across the street. Deever and his foreman, Concho Bozeman, rode in front, and both bent hard stares upon Slim and Jess as they passed.

The stares were returned.

Deever was a striking looking figure astride his big bay horse. His frame was big-boned and powerful, his face seamed and weather-beaten and half covered with a bushy growth of tawny whiskers. And his eyes, under shaggy brows, were yellow as a puma's, and as cruel. A cream-colored Stetson was on his head, and from his waist hung two of the longest barreled six-shooters Jess Stovall had ever seen. And they hung from crossed cartridge

belts filled to the buckle with shells.

Deever turned his head again, after he had passed the two on the sidewalk, and bent a penetrating glance upon Stovall. Conco Bozeman, his burly, swarthy faced foreman, also glanced back, then said something to Deever, who nodded shortly. The others in the cavalcade were talking among themselves, or exchanging words with people along the sidewalk. Several of them waved a hand or called a greeting to Slim, who returned the salutation in kind. They were salty-looking hairpins, of the same type as Mark Henley's ruffians, and as they passed Little South Hell their eyes searched the front of the saloon keenly, noting the number of horses tied at the racks outside.

If Fort Bend had been quiet before, it was dead quiet now. A sinister stillness seemed to have settled over the town, fraught with foreboding and menace. Not even the people who moved along the sidewalks, or their voices, seemed to dispel the tension. No breath of air stirred in the hardpan street, along which heat waves rose and fell, extending far out across the brown range toward the blue mountains. A mouse-colored burro, heavily laden with mesquite wood, trudged patiently downstreet behind its Mexican owner.

Stovall felt the tension, as did Slim. And their faces were just a little more masklike as they slowly continued toward the stage station. They hadn't missed seeing those faces peering from behind slatted windows and doors as Deever's spread rode into Six-Shooter Town.

Near the stage station they ran into Sheriff O'Barr and his deputy, Sid Helms, who were about to cross the roadway.

"Still feel like waltzin' us up to the *juzgado?*" asked Slim, as he and Stovall came up.

O'Barr glowered, half turned. "I've a mind to," he rasped. "You two ain't safe with a gun hereabouts. I don't believe you're workin' for Mather, anyhow."

"Better mosey over and ask Jimble-Jaw or Attorney Horn about it," pursued Slim meaningly. "Seems I just seen both of 'em enter South Hell a while ago."

O'Barr reddened. "What yuh drivin' at, Muvahill?" he snapped. "Henley's got nothin' to do with my duties of office!"

"Humph. A sheriff oughta be a better liar than that," commented Slim. "Sum'pin oughta be done about it. Reckon there will be, too, pretty pronto. After election there's gonna be some people I could mention that won't be able to hide behind a badge. An' then I'm goin' on a tour of Six-Shooter, slappin' faces as I find 'em."

"Lookin' for trouble, are you, Mulvahill?" said O'Barr hoarsely. His face had paled and his fingers twitched. Helms, his visage murderous, kept his hands well away from his belt, for Stovall's eyes were on him. And O'Barr was no match with Slim in a gunfight, and well knew it.

"Lookin' for trouble, huh?" he repeated.

"If the shoe fits, hombre, put it on and wear it. That piece of tin yuh sport on yore vest means less than nothin' to me this mornin'."

O'Barr choked, whirled on his heel. "C'mon, Sid," he said thickly. They walked quickly across the street, cutting up toward South Hell.

"You twisted *his* tail," grinned Stovall. "What now, curly wolf?"

"Likker," said Slim. "So much talkin' makes me thirsty."

THEY went into the Sky Limit and hoisted a shot, then walked back up the street to the Silver Dollar and had another. In the latter place they saw Sad Sim Blount, the Shelbyville freighter who draped himself on the bar next to them and joined in a drink.

"Sumpin's fixin' to pop heah today," he drawled. "Sumpin' big, an' prob'ly dirty. I been browsin' around some this mawnin'. Ole Jimble-Jaw an' his hellyuns is up to sumpin'. Keep yer eyes skunt, young fellers."

"Likely he's right," said Slim, after they left the saloon. "Sim Blount looks twice the fool he ain't. And they're shore as hell cookin' up something over in South Hell. Wanta go see what it is?"

Again they were interrupted in entering the lion's den. This time by a bow-legged waddie in a red shirt, goat-skin chaps and wearing a Carlsbad Stetson with a band of snake rattles. A ferret-faced, sly-eyed hombre who seemed to be looking every direction at once.

"Hyah, *Rojo,*" greeted Slim. "How's Chimney Buttes these days?"

"Poco-poco," said Red. He stared frankly at Stovall. "You hombres c'mon up to the Longhorn," he added abruptly. "The old man wants to see yuh."

"That's nice," grunted Slim. "An' what in hell does he want?"

"How do I know!" snapped Rojo, still staring at Jess. "Reckon he wants to buy yuh a drink, or mebbyso cut the pigeon wing."

"We had just started," said Jess Stovall, "over across the street to wet our whistles. You know any law that keeps yuh from joinin' us?"

Rojo stared. "Well, my gawd!" he muttered. Then he grinned. "Yeah, I know a law ag'in it. I don't want no winders ventilated in my back. They's a purty good law called safety fust, *amigos*. C'mon. I gotta tell the old man that 'un."

"Might as well," Slim shrugged. "Suit you, Lightnin'?"

"Keno. Lead on, Santy Anna."

THE Longhorn saloon was large and cool, full of men and noise and smoke. Men, heavily armed, stood thickly at the bar. From end to end, every table in the big, square room was occupied. The noise quieted a bit upon the entrance of the trio, and all eyes were turned upon them, the glances keen, speculative, questioning. Bull Bridger, the bartender-owner who was at the front end talking to Deever, Bozeman and another man, took the cigarette from his mouth and straightened up when he saw Stovall. Deever also turned and, hooking elbows on the bar, surveyed Jess from boot tip to hat crown.

Jess Stovall returned the cold scrutiny with steady eyes that were a trifle narrowed. Rojo was talking volubly, while the room listened. After a moment Tate Deever nodded shortly.

"Howdy, stranger," he rumbled. "Been hearin' some of yuh the last day or two. Have a drink?"

"Not now," said Jess coldly. "Later, maybe. You wanted to see me?"

"Uh-huh." Deever's puma eyes had never left Jess' face. "You lookin' for a job?" he asked abruptly, fishing for his pipe and tobacco sack.

"Nope. Got a job." Jess slowly began to twist a querly, his gaze roving about the room, where jokes and oaths and laughter again mingled. Slim and Rojo had passed on down the bar, and were greeting several congenial companions.

"I can give you one," said Deever, tamping his pipe. "A danged good one, puncher. *And*—a hundred dollar bonus to take it."

"Not interested," refused Stovall indifferently. He touched a match to his brownie, fanned his lungs deeply with smoke.

"A left-handed shooter," mused Deever. "Any good with the right?"

"So, so. Good enough for me, anyhow. That all yuh wanted to see me about?"

"Jest about. Wanted to meet yuh, though. How 'bout that drink now?"

"Seguro. I like my cards and likker alike—both straight," he told the barkeep.

Jess drank with them, standing between Deever and the burly, hard-faced Bozeman, with Bull Bridger shoving out his private bottle. A hard crew, salty as they came and quick on the trigger, summed up Stovall. A nicked piano began banging out a discordant tune, and down bar a cowboy let out a loud *yowee.* At a table somebody cursed loudly, viciously.

"How come you to hook up with Slim?" asked Deever suddenly, wiping his beard with the back of a hairy hand.

"How old is Anne?" retorted Jess. "Slim stood by yesterday, when I was in sort of a forked stick."

"He would," grunted Deever. "He's plenty itchy fingered, but ain't learnt to keep a hobble on his jaw. You coulda done worse, Stovall."

"Thanks," said Jess dryly. He rang a silver dollar on the bar with his left hand. "Fill 'em up, *amigo,*" to Bridger.

"Who you lookin' for here, Stovall?" demanded Deever, his yellow eyes glowing like fanned coals. "That's personal, but I want to know."

"Nobody that concerns you," said Jess coldly, an edge to his voice. "Here's confusion to the enemy, Señores."

"Huh!" grunted Deever, eying him through the bottom of his glass. "Happy days and a long summer, waddie!" He set down his glass with a thump. "You'll probably live about long enough to smoke half a cigarette, if you go over to Kinster's South Hell today," he finished. "Yuh *sabe* that, don'tcha?"

"Likely. Well, it's either hell or safe over the mountain for me—anywhere in Six-Shooter today." Jess grinned tightly. "Mebbe Jimble-Jaw will offer me a job."

"Uh-huh. A permanent one. I expect he's over there now, cuttin' a fandango because you gunned Pullen and Padget and Denger. I wish yuh lotsa luck today—stranger—you'll need it. And—I'd like to call you a friend in this mix-up."

The arrival of a tall, lean, swarthy man interrupted the talk; he called Deever off to one side, and spoke rapidly and in a low voice to him for some length of time. Jess, casually watching the two, noted Deever's face flush with passion, and his puma eyes grow cold as flakes of ice. Jess strolled on down the room, whistling under his breath, nodding to men here and there. He stopped and fixed himself a sandwich at the free lunch counter, drinking a glass of lukewarm beer with it.

THE minutes ticked on, until the hands of the clock behind the bar stood at 12:35 noon. More men entered the Longhorn, by twos and threes—at intervals others left unobtrusively. Jess loafed at the bar, idly talking with several of Deever's gunmen.

Presently Slim, who had gone out behind the saloon with four or five companions, returned, and after a moment he and Stovall left the Longhorn, and walked back down the street. It was practically deserted, save for tethered horses, buckboards, and spring wagons. At the corner, the two cut across the street directly for Little South Hell.

A man just starting out of the swinging doors halted dead in his tracks, his jaw loose, then hurriedly dove back inside. Three or four fellows sitting in the shade of a live oak tree before South Hell sat very still indeed. A man crossing the street at right angles to Jess and Slim slowed his pace perceptibly, his eyes never leaving them, his right elbow slightly crooked.

The two invaders stepped up on the sidewalk, nodded colorlessly to the men sitting in the shade, and pushed open the door of the saloon. Mark Henley had witnessed their coming—he watched them as they walked across the street, and his sooty eyes burned like hot agates.

"Watch that sidewinder hombre," rasped Chape Wingo, Henley's foreman, a gaunt, rangy fellow with a vicious, pock-marked face. "He's ridin' hell for trouble, an' knows it. He wouldn't bust into South Hell this way if he didn't aim to start a ruckus. Git him, and that kioty of a Slim both—soon as they poke their snoots in here!"

"Pull up your latigos, Chape," said Henley harshly, his mouth working. "There'll be no lead slinging till I give the word, you men. Remember that. This man can wait—just a little. Wait till the stage is in. No use in killin' one partridge, when there's a whole covey just beyond, bunched, waiting for our guns."

Jess Stovall and Slim Mulvahill, their eyes widely focused and alert for the first hint of treachery or trouble, halted just inside the door, one on each side of it, arms at their sides. Jess took in the entire scene with one flick of his black eyes—the broad, low-ceilinged room, the crowded bar, the filled tables against the opposite wall. A room filled with the odor of stale beer, raw whiskey, tobacco smoke and hot leather. The gaming tables in back—faro and roulette, chuck-a-luck and craps. A room gone suddenly still as death.

Long benches were lined against the walls under six square, rather high windows, screened with heavy, gravel-mesh wire. In the center of the room were two enormous cold-blast stoves, six feet high. A pool table and a billiard table stood on either side of the swinging double doors by which the place was entered from the street. At the lower end of the bar was an alcove that led into other rooms, and behind the gambling tables was another entrance leading to the backbar and dance hall.

THIS much Stovall saw at one glance before his eyes picked out Mark Henley and rested unwaveringly upon him. The swaying of the curtain at the end of the bar showed that someone had hurriedly left by that exit. Henley sat at one of the front tables, close by the billiard green, his knees crossed and a cigarette smoking away between his thin lips. His eyes, as they rested upon Stovall, were blank as Jess' could ever be.

And Jess Stovall, looking into those brilliant, incredibly hard eyes, felt the fine, prickly sweat starting through the skin of his forehead. For he knew at that instant, that here was a man who saw through the shadows—a man, a dreamer whose grotesque body suffered the punishments of a will forever driving him beyond limits. A man whose lust was power and mastery, a lust that swelled in his blood and worked like yeast in his hard and brilliant and treacherous mind.

He was not the ruffianly swashbuckler like Tate Deever. Instead, he was a man riding under the cloak of darkness, whose ways were dark and sinister and blood-stained, an outcast with an outcast crew. Probably more than a little mad, at times.

And as Jess looked at him, not speaking, Henley broke the silence by asking, in his harsh, metallic voice:

"Did Deever send you over here to start the ball a-rollin', stranger?"

Jess caught himself up, shook his head with a faint, thin smile.

"No. But he offered me a job. *And* —a hundred-dollar bonus to take it. Can you go him one better, Mister Henley?"

Jimble-Jaw said nothing, only stared at Stovall unblinkingly. The silent men in the room stirred a little, and not one of them had his fingers two inches from his guns. "Three Finger" Kinster, the bartender, was slightly stooped, one hand on a sawed-off shotgun behind the bar. In the stillness the heavy breathing of the men was the only sound audible. That deathly silence was a menace, plain and unmistakable, and the eyes of those hard-faced killers in the room were agleam with blood lust.

They had this hombre by the short hairs now. He might get one or two of them in the ruckus, but they'd cut him in two with bullets. Backs against the wall, elbows at the swinging doors, Jess and Slim waited, tense and swift eyed. Slim had not spoken a word since entering, nor did he speak now. Jess Stovall's panther-ish body inched forward and sideways half an inch—his lips grew a trifle tauter across his teeth.

Jimble-Jaw Henley also leaned forward a fraction, his eyes blazing. "What did you come over here for?" he grated. "To show off before the town, and let 'em know what a *malo hombre* yuh are?"

"No," said Jess between his teeth. "Not any. I'm lookin' for a man, Henley."

"Yeah? Did he look anything like Pullen, or Padget, or Denger?"

The dry irony didn't escape Stovall, and his eyes narrowed yet more. "No," he said in an even, icy voice. "He don't look like they did, but he's of the same spawn, Henley. His favorite target is where a man's suspenders cross."

Jimble-Jaw's teeth came together with a click—the wen on his puckered jawbone flamed blood red—his eyes became murderous. He half rose from his chair.

"Get out!" he cried, in a low, terrible voice. "Get out—*now!* Go, before I change my mind! God knows why I'm letting you loose, like this! Yet—yet I know the cards I hold in my hand! The next time you come . . . *come a-shootin'!*"

"I'll remember, Henley," said Jess Stovall grimly. "Any more talkin' I have to do—I'll say it with lead. *Adios.*"

THE swinging doors flapped—in one motion Stovall and Slim were outside, and walking down the sidewalk. Henley watched the sway of the doors a moment, then brought down his fist sharply upon the table-top. The noise broke the chill, hushed silence that gripped the room.

"By gosh, Chief!" bawled Chape Wingo, his vicious face distorted. "We had 'em cold turkey, an' then yuh let that lead-slinger walk outa here scot free! What the hell!"

It was evident the rest of the outlaws felt the same way about it, for the interior of Little South Hell sounded like a suddenly prodded bee-hive as men looked at one another, and cursed. Two of them — Spider Patton, wanted for murder in the Panhandle, and Few Burson, wanted likewise in Nacogdoches — started out after Slim and Jess. Mark Henley held up a restraining hand.

"Talk's cheap," he said harshly. "That hombre came in here lookin' for somebody — somebody he didn't find. He wasn't throwin' no windy. I know his kind. The first move any of you husky's would 'a made, he would 'a plugged me square between the eyes before you could have downed him. Shore, you would 'a

got him — him and Mulvahill, both. But that wouldn't 'a helped me any. And I got a big pan of chestnuts on the fire, this man's day."

"What's the matter with us goin' after 'em now?" demanded broken-nosed Few Burson angrily. "Me'n Spider, here, can —"

"Can wait, and do as you're ordered," finished Henley, with an oath. "If you're so proddy, go and tell Attorney Horn he can come back in here now, and to bring the county clerk with him."

Chape Wingo bit off a wedge of tobacco, tongued it in a cheek, and shook his head. "That was a bad mistake," he muttered to himself. "A danged bad 'un. We had orter downed 'em when we had 'em cold. The Chief'll be sorry, too, before he sees his shadder again!"

Subsequent events turned out that Chape Wingo was by way of being a prophet.

Neither Jess nor Slim looked back as they walked down the street. But tiny beads of sweat dotted Slim's upper lip, and his mouth was dry. "Boy!" he said softly. "Oh, mama! I may git closter to wearin' a harp an' crown in my young life, but I doubt it! I think my heart's too weak to herd with you much longer, Mister Stovall."

"Yeah — I've noticed how weak it is. About time for the stage, huh?"

Its arrival, twice a week in Fort Bend, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, was quite an occasion. Most of the town turned out en masse to witness the event. But at one o'clock that Saturday, very few citizens were congregated at the station; twelve or fifteen would sum up their total, and most of those were cowboys. Three or four of Deever's riders, and three or four of the men from Purgatory loafed around, keeping well away from one another. Sheriff O'Barr was there, and the Justice of the Peace, and Piney Sawyer. Sad Sim Blount; Doc Satterfield; Luke Darrel, proprietor of the Commercial House. Grat Coffey, candidate for sheriff. And, just before the stage came in, Hardy Cox arrived.

"You danged fools!" he muttered to Jess and Slim, grinning crookedly at them. "Air yuh plumb loco? You better keep on this side of the street, after this, an' shy clear of South Hell. I ain't figgered out yet why both of yuh ain't plumb full of holes right this minnit!"

"To tell you the truth," Jess Stovall replied, thoughtfully, "I haven't figured it out either, Cox. I'm afraid brother Jimble-Jaw's got bigger fish in the pan to fry than me or Slim."

Hardy Cox scratched his ear. "You may be right," he muttered. "I know the Old Man's riled about somethin', and certain fellers have been goin' and comin' all mawnin' to see him. Hell's about due to pop, I reckon. Well, no use to cry over spilt blood. Here comes the stage."

It topped the easy grade above Two Burros crossing, the four horses straining at the leather, the coach rocking and bumping. Driver and guard sat on the front seat, and when the stage stopped before the station, one lone passenger alighted from its interior. The guard hove down the express box from under the front seat, and a sack of mail. The driver wheeled the horses down a side alley toward their stables. The event was over until next Tuesday.

The lone passenger, a tall, well-knit fellow with sun-tanned face, close-clipped mustache, and wearing a Baden-Powell Stetson with hand-tooled leather band, said he was a prospective cattle buyer on the scout for suitable stock to start a breed ranch in the bayou country. He carried only one small grip, and wore no arms whatever that were at all visible. He gave his name as H. J. Carney, of Houston, and asked to be directed to the hotel.

Sheriff O'Barr, after getting all the details about him, directed him to the Commercial House, then hurried away, a strange gleam in his eyes. The crowd at the station slowly drifted away upstreet. Jess, along with Slim and Hardy Cox, also retraced their steps, and Stovall saw the several men, inconspicuously posted at places along the right-hand side of the main street, were passing some sort of signal along to Little South Hell. The left side of the street —Jaybird side—seemed to be quiet and peaceful enough.

It seemed to be sort of an unwritten law in Six-Shooter Town that the Wood-

peckers stay on the south side of the main drag, the Jaybords on the north. And anybody straying out of bounds did so at their own risk.

Grat Coffey was walking toward the hotel with Mr. Carney of Houston, and the two were some twenty paces ahead of Slim and Jess and Cox. As they turned into the hotel entrance, two men who had been loitering on the corner across the street left the shade of the sidewalk, and started across the caliche toward the Commercial House. And both wore twin guns thonged low on their hips.

Jess turned into the door of the hotel, Slim and Cox following. Luke Darrel had not arrived from downstreet yet, and as Stovall entered, the stranger and Coffey were just entering the barroom, which was in a small adobe addition behind and to the right of the office. It wasn't a big room, and had no other door save the one giving into the hotel lobby, and a small entrance at its rear. No door opened onto the street, but two wire-meshed windows afforded a hazy view of the sidewalk.

THE cattle buyer and Coffey had seated themselves at a small table near the wall, and the shuffling Mexican who acted as barkeep was taking their order. Three or four other men were in the place, seated at tables; another leaned against the bar near the rear exit —a short, squat man with flat nose and thick, flabby lips. He wore a straggly mustache which grew thin on one side, due possibly to a deep scar on his upper lip, and it gave his face a lopsided appearance.

Apparently the fellow was pretty drunk, for he kept mouthing to himself and playing with a tequila glass, while his watery eyes roved here and there and back again. A bone-handled .45 hung at his hip. As Stovall entered, he was muttering about somebody he would "as soon down on sight as eat dinner." Apparently he wasn't considered any serious menace, for the card players paid not the slightest attention to him, even when he left the bar, and glass in hand, shambled over to their table and stood watching the play with slightly unsteady stance.

"Who's the jughead?" Jess asked Slim, as they waited at the bar for the Mexican to serve them.

"Name's Clawson," said Mulvahill. "Loafer about town, and a big bag of wind. What the hell's the matter with that Shuck—paralyzed? Hey, *andale, pronto!* C'mere! We're dyin' of thirst."

The Mexican mumbled something under his breath and shuffled up to the end of the bar after taking Coffey and the cattle buyer their drinks. Slim Mulvahill was standing at Cox's left elbow while Stovall stood at his right and all were facing toward the back bar. But in the fragment of cracked mirror that tilted crazily behind the bottles, Jess Stovall saw the two men who had just crossed the street appear in the lobby doorway.

They didn't saunter in like men in search of refreshment. They popped up all of a sudden—a flash of movement —and their faces were twisted in killer's snarls. Hats pulled well down over their eyes, they were going for their guns even as Jess caught their distorted reflections in the dingy bar mirror.

Instinct moved Jess Stovall—and he moved like greased lightning heading for a certain spot to strike. He knew the game the second he saw the men; knew it even before he heard the twisted-faced man at the card table let out a bawl of rage and jerk his pistol. One of the men in the doorway fired from the hip, and Grat Coffey, who was seated with his back to them, half rose in his chair and stiffened. As he twisted sideways, a second bullet from the door tore the stub of cigarette from his lips.

But the man who had loosed the first shot was diving forward now, his heart split by Stovall's bullet. The second man swung his pistol like a flash toward the trio, and Stovall's second bullet, as well as Slim Mulvahill's first one, took him dead center. He banged into the door jamb, slithered down to his knees, pitched across the body of his companion. Smoke rings eddied about the small room, stinking of black powder fumes.

The twisty-faced hombre at the card table was now doing what was perhaps

the nerviest deed of his vicious career. Grat Coffey, his face gray, had whirled to see who was shooting. And straight at him the scar-lipped man was firing point blank. There was no mistaking his intention; he was not even looking at the men in the doorway. His desperate eyes were fixed upon the back of Grat Coffey's head.

THERE was little chance of beating him to the shot, but Jesse Stovall pulled trigger twice in less than a second. The guns roared together. Coffey staggered into the wall, grasped at it with both hands, the six-shooter he had drawn slipping from his limp fingers. He sank slowly to the floor, blood streaming from his head.

And down across the card table, scattering chips and pasteboards, slapping a ducking cowboy in the face with his dropping pistol barrel, the twisty-faced man crashed—nor ever moved again of his own accord. The four players who had huddled under the table when the shooting began, started slowly to heave themselves up when it ceased.

The cattle buyer, his bronzed face pale and his lips tight, had spread-eagled himself against the wall. Now he glanced curiously at the three men at the bar and stepped around the table to where Coffey lay, half supported against the wall. Hardy Cox, moving in three jumps to the door, unceremoniously shoved the two dead gunmen out of the portal with a booted foot and slammed the door tight, sliding a bar into place behind it. Shouts and running footsteps sounded from the street, pounded in the lobby. Excited voices volleyed questions.

The men at the card table, and one other who had sat watching the play, vanished hastily out of the rear door. With a swift-eyed glance around, Hardy Cox took command of the situation.

"Stovall, you and Slim light a shuck, pronto, out the back," he said tersely. "Me'n the stranger over yonder will stay here and explain this mess. I reckon Grat's bad hurt—I guess they got him this trip, damn 'em! Anyhow, we'll take keer of things here. You boys back-alley-it up to Tim Breen's—*an' stay there* till I see yuh!"

Jess and Slim did as he advised. The back door of Luke Darrel's bar opened onto a wide alleyway behind the stores and business houses, and the pair walked rapidly up this toward the Buzzard Saloon. Sounds of commotion came from the main street — shouts and questions. Of the five punchers who had just vacated the room ahead of Jess and Slim, there was no sign.

"Made 'emselves scarce," commented Mulvahill, reloading his gun, his eyes roving. "That trick those jaspers tried was old as Noey, but it woulda got by here in Fort Bend, long as Horn's district attorney. I wonder just what ole Jimble-Jaw's got up his sleeve, as play number two. With Grat Coffey outa the way. . . ."

"Slim," Jess Stovall stopped short, directly behind the Longhorn Saloon, "I'm goin' to get my horse and stake him behind Tim's place. My Winchester's already up there, and I've got a hunch I'll need Six-Bits pretty bad this man's day. The ball's rollin' now, and the pitch is hot. You mosey on up to Tim's, and I'll join yuh there in a jiffy."

"Nothin' doin'," grated Mulvahill. "They's a bounty on yore scalp right now, Mister Stovall. *You* g'wan to Tim's, and I'll git yore hoss—and mine."

"Like hell. Look here, Slim—"

The argument was interrupted by the sudden appearance of the fellow called Rajo, who sidled out the back door of the Buckhorn like a jack-in-a-box. "What's all the arguymint about?" he demanded peevishly. "Shake a laig for the Buzzard, Stovall, or ease in here. The Pecker'll shoot yuh on sight from now on out. You queered a game of theirs at the Commercial a minnit ago. Me'n Slim here will get yore cayuse an' bring it to yuh. G'wan now, cowboy. Show some sense."

"Yeah," added Slim. "The Peckers might take a notion to shoot up ole Tim's bailiwick, bein' he's a friend of yourn. Cut stick, fella."

That last decided Jess. Reluctantly, he made tracks for the rear door of the Buzzard, while Slim and Rojo trotted down the side street toward the Mosshorn corral and stable. It was certain the Woodpeckers would be after Jess

now, and in full force. He had frustrated the clumsy, brutal plot back there in the saloon. Or if he hadn't boogered it up, he had at least avenged Grat Coffey, twice shot from behind. Anybody trying to shoot up Tim Breen's place, on his, Stovall's, account, was going to hub into a lot of bad luck.

BUT three people were in the Buzzard, and one of those was Tim himself. All stood at the front door and windows, looking out. The gaming tables were deserted. Even the mex swamper was missing. Both the men with Breen were townsfolk, evidently storekeepers. Jess entered the back hall on the balls of his feet, looked up front carefully, then entered the barroom. Tim whirled around as his Mexican spurs jangled on the floor.

"What's happening down yonder?" asked Breen quickly.

Briefly Jess told him, omitting names. Coffey shot, three men killed.

Tim shook his head, wiped his hands on his apron. "Hell's fixin' to bust loose," he said gloomily. "It's already busted, in fact. Henley's men are goin' all over town, tackin' up notices that election will be held this evenin', instead of Tuesday. Guess they figger with Grat outa the way, O'Barr'll have a cincherino today. And the Purgatory's got more men in town this evenin', than Deever."

"I see," said Stovall slowly. "But how can they call and order an election this way? I thought it was to be next Tuesday?"

"It was," said one of the storekeepers dryly. "But with Henley controllin' the district attorney, and sheriff, and most of the men in the courthouse, they can order the election just about as they please. Henley just waited till the stage come in to spring his play — waited to see whether any Ranger or Federal marshal rid in on it. Bein' there wasn't, he cut his wolf loose. Looky! Here comes Sheriff O'Barr, and a couple of gunslingers, totin' an armful of notices. They're puttin' 'em up on every store, and corner."

The other man chuckled. "Bet they don't plaster one on the Buckhorn door," he remarked wryly. "I'm glad I shet shop when them fust bullets went off, down yander."

The man's discourse was interrupted by the pounding thud of wildly galloping hoofs, coming from upstreet. Jess looked out the door. For his sharp ears had caught, above the drone of the man's voice, the faint and muffled but unmistakable sound of a shot, out beyond the east end, toward the mesquite flat.

THE thudding pound of the hoofs grew louder and louder on the hard *caliche* road. The next instant a riderless horse hove into view at the end of the main street, dashed past the courthouse, plunged on down the street, stirrups swinging, bridle flying wide. The horse seemed mad with terror—its eyes rolled, its nostrils glared red, foam flecked back from its mouth. Jess Stovall stared narrowly at the fleeing animal.

On its rump, just behind the saddle cantle, was a long bloody gash. And the empty saddle the roan bore was splotched and streaked with a sinister dark stain.

"That's Harl Logan's hoss," cried one of the storekeepers. "See the Lazy-M brand? One of Anse Mather's riders. Sum'pin's happened to him, shore as Christmas!"

Men downstreet were trying to stop the runaway, but without success. And upstreet, several persons near the courthouse were running toward the mesquite flat; others were mounting ponies and spurring them out that way. Jess saw old man Anse Mather, in a buckboard driven by another bearded rancher, dash by, the two screwtail buckskins pulling it going in a long lope.

A whistle at the back of the saloon attracted his attention, and when he slid through the rear room to investigate, he found Slim and Rojo there with not only his palomino, but their own cayuses. Jess flung a word to them about the runaway and excitement out on the flat. He vaulted into the saddle without touching the stirrups and shot away like a bolt. Slim and Rojo, touching spurs to their ponies, were but a jump behind.

Past the back of the buildings, they rode cutting into the main street well beyond the courthouse. All three ponies

were range bred and fleet as shadows. Several men, riding at a long lope, were passed like they were standing still, and stared after the racing trio wonderingly. When Jess saw, just beyond a little rise and in a tiny swale where the road crooked, a black mass of men gathered about something on the ground, he flung up a hand to slow the pace, and the three ponies settled down to a fast canter.

A group of some twelve or fifteen horsemen sat their mounts nearby, a bit to the side of the road. Horsemen who evidently were just coming to town.

Two or three buckboards also stood there, and one spring wagon. When Jess and his companions rode up, old Anse Mather was standing above a prone, sprawled-out figure, and his bushy beard was trembling furiously. He shook the gnarled dogwood cane at the horsemen, who were grinning insolently at him.

"It's nothin' but blasted, dirty murder!" old Anse bellowed, his shark-belly eyes flaming. "If my arms and laigs wasn't so stove up with rheumatiz, I'd take the whole caboodle of yuh on, one at a time—you stinkin' skunks! That boy there on the ground, Harl Logan, never harmed a fly in his life. I brung him up like one of my own—raised him from a shaver. And now—now, you polecats meet him out here, start a ruckus, an' murder him in cold blood. Oh, Lord, if I wuz twenty year younger!"

"Put a halter on that gab of yourn, old man!" snarled a metallic voice. "I done tole yuh he was downed in a fair fight—he drawed on me fust. And I don't aim to let nobody—no less a spavin-jinted ole road runner like you—call me names. What you've said is plumb ample."

At the speaker's first words, Jess Stovall stiffened as if an electric current had passed through him. He turned his pony slightly, just enough to get a good look at the man who was talking. And when he did, a light of unholy triumph leapt into his soot-black eyes, and the corner of his mouth drew up in a wolfish smile.

He had reached the end of his quest. Reached it at last.

A HULKING, bull-neck fellow; heavy-jowled, thick-lipped, evil-eyed. His face covered with a week's growth of black stubble, his yellowed teeth bared in an ugly leer. The fingers of his right hand twitching, the lust to kill burning in his eyes. Nutria Stetson jerked low over his forehead; greasy, black hair growing thick and long on his neck and over his ears.

And those ears, instead of being of conventional rounded design, were shaped like the ears of a fox. Pointed, grotesque, wholly incongruous to the rest of his brutal features. Devil-Ears, the Mexicans along the Rio had called them. *Diaboloreja.*

Three years now Jess Stovall had sought "Diabo'reya" Covey. Covey, the dry-gulching murderer of his uncle, Pecos rancher. Covey, with a price on his head for murder before that. And now, Jess Stovall was face to face with his quarry. There would be no escape this time, even if he did sit his horse in the middle of fifteen of Jimble-Jaw Henley's killers. It looked like lots of people were coming to Six-Shooter Town to die that man's Saturday.

"Somebody loan me a gun!" old man Mather was shouting hoarsely.

Jess Stovall moved Six-Bits two steps forward. "No need for it, Mister Mather," he said quietly, and the tone of his voice brought every man's eyes to his face. "No need. I'll attend to this *cabrone.*"

And to Covey: "So we meet at last, Diaboreya. A long trail, but finished now. Let's see how you feel about shootin' somebody, *from in front!*"

And the deathly, sinister softness of his words sent a chill coursing along even Slim Mulvahill's and Rojo's backbones.

At the first words Dud Covey's face went a dirty alkali white; his blue jowl slacked, his eyes bulged from his head. His burly frame seemed to shrink; tried to crawl within itself like a snail into its shell. A terrible oath escaped his lips—sweat popped out on his face and forehead; a drop ran down his nose, splashed on his dirty shirt front. The breath rasped croupily in his throat. He was stifling.

"You— you!—" he mouthed in a gurgling, unnatural voice. The men on the roadside, had grown very quiet, only their strained breathing broke the silence. One of the mounted men coughed and Slim Mulvahill's icy eyes instantly covered him.

"I see you're still up to yore old tricks," went on Jess in the same deadly voice, and the muscles of his jaw bulged under the pressure of set teeth. "You managed to cheat the hangman a good-while, Diaboreya—but pay-day's due now. *Now*—savvy? You're overdue about three years in hell."

Then, like the crack of a bullwhip, "Go for yore iron, you scurvy, yellow son, or I'll melt the lead of this gun together through yore guts!"

Covey's blanched face was gray; his lips skinned back over his teeth in the snarl of a beast at bay. A minute had passed—a minute of stark, deadly pantomime. Covey was trembling violently. He knew this avenger from the Pecos country, and knew that his hour had come. But his arm and hand seemed paralyzed, and a sharp, whistling breath escaped his lips.

"Ten seconds more, Covey!" said Stovall with deadly emphasis.

A dribble of saliva ran down a corner of the killer's mouth; his lips worked champingly. He grabbed the bridle reins, tried to shy his horse aside and pull his gun in one swift move. But Stovall was swifter. The pistol leapt from its holster, spat flame. Once, twice, three times it roared — and three times Dud Covey screamed like a tortured panther. His horse reared, and he swayed, grabbed at the saddle horn, missed, toppled sideways. His gun had not cleared leather.

The claybank he was riding whirled, snorting, and leapt for the sea of chaparral and cactus and mesquite bordering the road. Covey's foot hung in the stirrup. Still screaming, with three lead slugs through his belly, he disappeared into the brasada, dangling beneath the pony's stomach, his body bouncing over stones and stumps, yucca and pear, the pony's left hind-hoof striking some part of his anatomy at every jump.

It was perhaps twelve seconds before the blood-curdling screeches ceased. Stovall, his eyes flicking over the group of silent, tense-faced horsemen, slowly sheathed his hot-barreled Colt.

"Keno," he said grimly. "Let's rattle our spurs, *amigos*."

And, without another word, the three horsemen whirled their mounts, touched them with the rowels and sped away toward Six-Shooter Town in a cloud of alkali dust.

A rat-faced outlaw, who had been seated on his horse next to Covey, wet his lips and slid his beetle-like eyes to the rider beyond, who was still staring with mouth agape.

"Holy jumpin' jackrabbits!" he muttered. "Didja see that draw, Matt?"

"See nawthin," growled back the other busky, jerking himself together with a start. "I didn't see nuthin' but a flash an' a bang. Who is that jasper anyhow?"

"Dunno who he is, but I ain't anxious to swap lead with him. If they's many more like him in town today on the prod, I think I'll ride over the mounting."

"Yuh will not," snarled their scarred-faced leader, Newboldt. "Try anything like that, an' I'll drop yuh, Lackey. Jingle yer hocks, you *paisanos*, we're goin' after that smokeroo! And the Boss is waitin'."

JESS STOVALL rode back into Fort Bend with a sense of elation in his heart. He had fulfilled his mission; the quest for revenge that had driven him half across the state of Texas was ended. The score was paid now. His job in Six-Shooter Town was finished.

He tethered his pony behind the Buzzard, along with Slim and Rojo's, and entered the saloon by the back way. Several men were in there, all talking in low voices, all armed.

Sad Slim Blount, leaning against the front bar, shifted his cud of tobacco, and spat darkly. His yellow eyes bored into Stovall as he swung up and brusquely ordered a drink.

"Tole yuh sumpin' big and dirty wuz ready to pop," he announced. "An' the high sheriff's got a warrant fer yore arrest. Murder's the charge on it. Reckon he's swearin' in a posse now—down at South Hell."

"That so?" Stovall's mouth tightened.

"Let the high sheriff try to serve it."

"He won't—not by hisself. Feller's'll begin' votin' now, *muy pronto.* O'Barr's been mighty busy. All the signs is up—'cept on the Buckhorn, an' vicinity. Deever ain't made airy move yit—got his kyards kivered. Guess yuh heerd about the shootin' a while ago in Luke Darrel's bailiwick?"

"About killin' those three bushwackers? Yeah, I know about it."

"Reckon yuh do know 'bout that part of it—seein' as how yuh done it. I'm talkin' about that deppity marshal that wuz supposed to be a cattle buyer—an' Hardy Cox."

"What?" Jess Stovall slowly set down his glass; Slim Mulvahill moved closer. Rojo, unobserved, slipped out the back way and disappeared.

"Yeah, they got 'em," droned on Blount. "Resistin' arrest, O'Barr called it. 'Pears that Hardy an' this deppity man wuz in the room with the dead fellers an' Grat Coffey. Grat wa'n't kilt, by the way—shot up purty bad, but still livin', but the doc sez he'll mebbe git over it. Reckon Henley's polecats thought he wuz dead when they shot down Cox and the 'tother man in there."

"Who shot them?" Stovall's voice was like flakes of ice.

"Sid Helms downed Hardy, who hadn't even yanked his hawglaig. An' Few Burson kilt the deppity. Seems he tole 'em what he wuz just before they begin smokin' up things. Co's they couldn't let no sich man as that get away alive after seein' all he did. They're spreadin' some cock-an'-bull story now 'bout him bein' accidentally kilt by a stray bullet."

Sad Slim spat again, hitched up his sagging gun belt.

"Ef they ketch you, they'll hang yuh shore, partner," he warned. "Six-Shooter Town belongs to Jimble-Jaw this evenin'—lock, stock an' barrel."

JESS STOVALL's lips were white, his eyes metallic with cruelty. He settled the black Stetson firmly on his forehead, reached over and took one of the bone-handled .45's from Mulvahill's belt, stuck it in his waistband, then snaked out his hidden .38 and inspected it fleetingly. The band of Henley's horsemen he had left out on the flat was riding down the street at a long lope, kicking up dust clouds. They had stopped by the court house to vote, and were now in a hurry to reach South Hell.

Battle light shone in their eyes.

Stovall slid behind the counter, snatched up his .30-30, slammed a cartridge in the barrel. He stepped to the door, threw the rifle to his shoulder, pressed trigger. Its dry smash cracked like a snap of doom, and the rider called Newboldt pitched forward on his saddle horn, then tumbled to the ground as his horse reared wildly. A second, then a third time the Winchester spat, and two more outlaws left their saddles. The others tried to rein up, shouting, cursing, yelling. Twice more Stovall fired, and two more of Henley's henchmen tumbled.

"It's open season on skunks and kiotys," grated Stovall, stepping outside with pistols in both hands. "The sooner we stomp out that nest of sidewinders down yonder, the better it'll be."

Then he shifted.

And he began firing with both pistols fast as he could pull trigger, walking slowly toward the edge of the sidewalk. A bullet splintered a post next to his head; another slammed into the wall behind him. The sawed-off shotgun of Tim Breen's bellowed—yells and cries followed. Slim Mulvahill had gone into action, firing through the front window.

Nor were they alone.

A regular fusillade started down-street. The remaining buskys left on their horses fled pell-mell, taking what cover they could, as Tate Deever and his hellions opened up from the Buckhorn. The men in South Hell, who at the first firing had started to swarm out, hastily retreated into their hangout as lead sprayed them, and returned the fire. Glass tinkled; shouts and curses and yells echoed up and down the street. It was a gunsmoke inferno.

"You," snapped Stovall to the slack-jawed man who ran the general store, "get into yore shack the back way, and lug out all the ammunition and six-shooters you can pack. Got any dynamite?"

The storekeeper hadn't, but another man present volunteered the information

that he had half a dozen sticks at his house. "Go get 'em," ordered Stovall. "And you, Mr. Blount, watch the back end of the saloon. Slim, you an' Tim take care of the front. *And shoot to kill!*"

Jess left on the run, before anybody could ask any questions. He vaulted into his saddle, shot away from the shelter of the small shed where his palomino had been tethered, and rode like a Cossack down the narrow alley between the Buzzard and the store flanking it. Once on main street, he wheeled westward, and bending low over his pony's neck, gave it the reins.

"Now do yore stuff, Six-Bits," he gritted, "and I'll do mine."

The first furious fussillade had died down, and only spasmodic snap shots were sounding along the main drag of Fort Bend. Nine casualties lay on the hot, hard *caliche* roadway — some had dragged themselves to the sparse shade of adjacent galleries. Stovall had struck like a rattler, without warning, beating the Woodpeckers at their own game. And Tate Deever's Jaybirds hadn't been a half-minute behind him in opening up.

MARK HENLEY, his grotesque features working with passion, his fingers twitching above his six-shooter, stalked about the saloon like a crazed animal.

"Bushwhack my riders, will they?" he screeched, saliva dribbling from a corner of his mouth. "We've got to clean out that Buckhorn, pronto. Those we don't kill, we'll hang to them cottonwoods and we've *got* to get that Stovall gent—get him a site more pronto. Three-Fingers, serve a drink to everybody, then we'll get busy."

"I told yuh we'd orter downed him while we had him cold—" began Chape Wingo. A fierce tattoo of hoofs, punctuated by the crackle of gun-fire, cut short his words. The watchers at the windows and double front door exclaimed profanely and began cutting loose with their guns. Henley sprang to the window, his own pistol upraised.

And then he came.

Passing like a streak across the *caliche* in front of South Hell was a galloping horseman, bent low over his saddle, guns in each hand and both roaring. A leaden hail rained against the dust-grimed windows and swinging door of the saloon, to the accompaniment of splintering wood and shattering glass. The zipping lead thudded into the building and along the sidewalk, the smash of the pistols seemingly giving added wings to the fleet, black-tailed palomino.

The interior of South Hell resembled a prodded ant-hill. A hook-nosed gunman slumped against the bar, clawing at a punctured shoulder; a second lay on the floor, his scalp split wide open by a creasing bullet. Door and windows were bullet-scarred; a couple of bottles were broken. Three-Fingers Kinster slowly raised up from behind the shelter of the counter, his vicious face pale. Henley was raving like a madman.

"After him!" he screeched, waving his fishless yellow hands. "Out after him, men! Kill—*kill* him!"

A surge toward the sidewalk began, but as the doors burst open to spew forth the cursing, shouting mob, guns began to bark and bellow in the Buckhorn. A sleet of buckshot slammed against the front of the South Hell, interspersed with rifle and pistol lead. A man screamed, went down pawing the air; another did a hard nose-dive on the sidewalk; a third slumped, was dragged screeching inside by his companions. A fourth man, already outside, tried to run, and got exactly eight steps before a bullet knocked him over.

"Out the back way!" foamed Jimble-Jaw, ducking as a bullet slapped into the wall near his head. "Out, then scatter. We'll work up on those sons of dogs like Injuns—"

"No use, Chief!" panted one of his clan. "Bushwhackers back there are shootin', too. They downed three of us tryin' to sneak in. We got here with four outa the seventeen we started with."

"You lie!" mouthed Henley. "You, Chape, take three hombres, and try the door."

The foreman did as ordered. He didn't like this being penned up like rats in a trap. If Henley hadn't been so all-fired busy setting his traps to steal the election, and kill off Grat Coffey, he would

have seen that old Tate Deever was making a loop for him, somewheres. The boss of the Diamond Tail wasn't one to stand by and let anybody put anything over on him without a fight. He had quietly built his loop, giving out the impression that he was laying low, and playing the waiting game.

And now—now he had Purgatory by the short hairs. Had 'em penned up like white faces in a branding corral.

THE rider who reported the back way closed had spoken truly. No sooner did the door open than bullets began thudding into it, and one man fell back with a shattered forearm. The lanky foreman hastily closed and barred the exit, and beat a retreat from the two bullet-splintered windows, where lead was zipping through to flatten or glance off of the walls.

"Where's Newboldt?" he demanded, sliding back into the barroom.

"Deader'n a cold Eskimo. That hellyun in the Buzzard got him first shot outa the box with his Winchester. He's layin' up the street."

Newboldt was *segundo* to Wingo—the man who led the body of horsemen, of whom "Diaboreya" Covey had been a members—into Six-Shooter Town. Chape scratched his rusty hair, drew down a corner of his mouth.

"Look's like we're it," he said grimly to Henley. "Deever's snipers are thicker'n fiddlers in hell out back; they're thicker'n that 'crost the street. They're perched on tops of the houses; skulkin' the alleys. Reckon they've kilt all our men outside by now—them, and that wild-ridin' hellyun together. We just got the base-*ment* to go into—an' that don't git us no place 'cept underground. We might as well make a run for it, Chief."

Henley's face was the color of dirty alkali, but his eyes blazed like a madman's. "Not any," he said harshly. "We'll wait here till dark, then shoot our way out. Kinster, shoot out another drink, all around."

The minutes wore on, quiet now save for occasional snap shots. The street was deserted save for the strings of restless, snorting ponies tethered at the South Hell hitchracks. No mounts stood before the Buckhorn—sometime after noon they had been quietly removed to the corral in back. Henley, seeing, swore horribly.

It was another mistake of his. He whirled upon the putty-faced Sheriff O'Barr, who crouched against a wall.

"Why didn't *you* notice a few things?" he rasped metallically. "I was tryin' to tend to it *all*, and now look! The game's jimmied, looks like. It ain't goin' to be healthy hereabouts for you, or Attorney Horn, or Noonan, the county clerk, either. It'll be yore funeral, well as mine."

Mosley Horn, the cadaverous-looking lawyer, and pudgy, red-faced Boyd Noonan, county clerk, both pawns of Henley, were almost as white around the gills as Sheriff O'Barr. It had seemed like a sure bet, this election steal, after killing Grat Coffey, the candidate. But they had been just a little too sure; had counted a bit too heavily on the support of the nesters and squatters and small-fry ranchers swarming to town that evening and voting under the protection of Purgatory guns. Something had gone badly wrong.

Instead of tucking tail between their legs, and locking themselves in their houses, the opposition in Fort Bend were going by devious ways to the court house and casting their ballots. Hostile ranchers and small spreaders were being warned away from town by men posted on the outskirts, or else given the privilege of voting for Coffey, who was fighting for his life in Satterfield's office. A case of dog eat dog.

A NOISE overhead drew Jimble-Jaw abruptly from his black revery. The startled glances of the outlaws flicked upward, the room became deathly quiet as they strained their ears, listening. There was silence for a long minute, then a heavy, blackish object streaked past the east window of South Hell. It was only a passing blur, yet two wary watchers took shots at it as it hurtled by. A terrific crash on the boardwalk made every one of them jump.

Six of the horses, plunging and rearing, broke loose and started into a wild stampede down the street; the others fought the bridle reins, quivering and

snorting. "Damn his locoed hide!" snarled Wingo, his fingers working. "He throwed down that piece of tin to skeer the hosses—!" . . .

The words were not out of his mouth before another resounding crash shook South Hell, this time in the front street. Again the ponies tied there bucked and buckled and squatted, many of them breaking loose and galloping away in terror, stirrups swinging wild. The pieces of corrugated iron, lugged along the roofs by Stovall and two Diamond Tail waddies, did the trick.

One more piece was left. As it crashed to the street the remaining horses went loco, to the chorus of shrill yelps and yipees. All but two broke loose, and those two, straining with terror, were choking themselves by setting back on the tied reins. Six or eight shots sounded from the roof.

Stovall and Rojo had cut the bridle reins enough with well-placed bullets so that the horses could snap them. The remaining mounts left in a cloud of dust, on a dead run. Then the snipers quit the South Hell roof, leaping from stone to stone lightly.

Jimble-Jaw, his face like a death-mask, his mouth working, watched the stampede without comment. A hoarse exclamation from one of the window peekers drew his eyes that way. And what he saw made his lips draw across his yellow teeth in a taut, white line.

A sorrel pony was trotting down the street, head up, nostrils quivering nervously, looking from side to side. And tied across the saddle with latigos, like a sack of limp meal, swung the lifeless body of Sid Helms, deputy, who had been on duty at the court house. Hatless, his head lolling and body swaying with the pony's jerky pace, he passed down main street in front of South Hell, a grisly taunt to the men holed up inside. Slim Mulvahill had a sense of sardonic humor, as well as a swift trigger finger.

A strangled breath burst from O'Barr's throat, he covered his face with his arm. Attorney Horn had turned a greenish pallor; Clerk Noonan was gibbering in-

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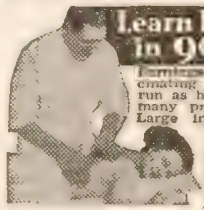
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sanely. And the wind wheezed chokily in Henley's lungs.

He was tasting the bitterness of defeat, of disaster, for the first time. Ruin stared him in the face. Ruin, and worse. His house of cards had come tumbling down about his head, and in the bat of an eye. He had lost everything in life worth having, to him. The fear and envy of his fellows, his adherents, his admirers. His partisans from the hill country, cowed and awed, had deserted him flat. His feet had brought him to the end of the road.

"All my chips on the table, and nothin' in my hand but a busted flush," he muttered. "Through, finished. Not a dead man's chance."

Outside, the town had grown ominously quiet. Not a gunshot, not a sound, to break the mid-afternoon stillness. The sun beat down savagely from a sky like scoured pewter, a sky empty save for the far dots of cruising buzzards. A haze of churned dust hung over the deserted street, through which the sunlight played and stabbed in scorching, shifting layers of light. In an outskirt corral, a burro brayed faintly.

A SUDDEN tattoo of shots up street broke the uncanny silence. A whisky barrel was rolling slowly down the caliche road, propelled by leaden slugs that hammered into the whote oak near the top. As the bullets drained from swift-firing guns into it, the barrel picked up speed with every shot, gathering momentum down the slight incline of Main Street that led westward to the river.

The firing had ceased before the keg reached South Hell, but it was thumping and bounding like a runaway boulder down the street when it passed. And inside it was the limp body of a man, knees drawn in, body rolling like a wad of cast-off clothing. It passed the staring men in the saloon, racing downward, to at last disappear over the curve of hill leading to Two Burrows ford on the Navisad.

"Gawd!" whispered Chape Wingo, "Who was in that there barrel?"

"Few Burson," said Henley quietly.

He was calm, icy cold, now. "I know his boots. Few was up at the courthouse with Helms. Guess he's the last of our men outside—"

A terrific concussion at the rear of the saloon drowned out his words. The barroom rocked drunkenly; glass shattered; bottles toppled and fell with jangling crashes. A great blast of wind seemed to sweep South Hell, bellying the windows, tearing at the doors. Pictures fell from the walls; plaster, debris. Huge cracks leapt into being like they were gashed with monster knives. The ears of the outlaws in there rang deafeningly, their heads swam dizzily. The sound of splintered timbers and falling dobe came from out back.

"Dynamite!" gasped Henley, jarred from his icy mood. "Quick — they've busted in the back. . . ."

Galloping hoofbeats again, pounding a wild tattoo on the *caliche*. Coming upstreet this time, running the gauntlet a second trip. Stovall, on his fleeing, black-tailed palomina, bent low over the pommel, pistol in one hand, a stubby, black stick with smoking fuse in the other.

With the scream of a catamount, Mark Henley sprang to the window, regardless of everything save to get a shot at the stranger who had done more than anybody, or anything that day, to ruin him. If he could kill Stovall, he would kick out happier. His pistol blazed at the flying streak, once, twice—

Stovall's arm made a sideswipe arc, the black cylinder hurtled end for end straight at the front of South Hell. No —not one cylinder, but two tied together; two sizzling, smoking fuses at their tips, burned almost down! And before they fairly landed a gun was in that right hand, and both pistols were beating a wicked tattoo of shots.

Stovall, unhit, leapt from Six-Bits just beyond the general store, two buildings upstreet from the saloon. The doors of the Buckhorn opened, spewing forth armed waddies, led by a huge, tawny bearded man with Colts in each hand. Shots crackled from nearby roofs. Jess Stovall, hastily reloading, sprinted toward the corner like a panther waving the

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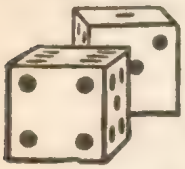

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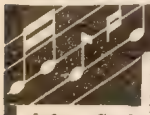

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other on with his six-shooter. The whole thing had taken maybe ten seconds, not over twelve at most.

A sheet of flame, a deafening explosion, blotted out the front of Little South Hell. The sidewalk, the flimsy wooden gallery, erupted and collapsed; the entire front and corner of the saloon buckled and caved in. Smoke and dust billowed and geysered; screams and yells and screeched oaths sounded above the din. But instantly they were drowned out by the snarl and crackle of gunfire —gunfire coming from the rear, side and front as grim-faced and hard-eyed waddies closed in to wipe out the remainder of Mark Henley's Purgatory outfit.

OLD Anse Mather, standing in front of the Commercial House, leaning on his cane, saw, and his shark-belly eyes gleamed and glittered with unholy light. Harl Logan, and Hardy Cox, were being avenged now. Old Kothmann the saddler, peeking fearfully from behind the barred shutters in his shop, breathed heavily and muttered, *"Gott im Himmel!"* over and over. Doc Satterfield the frayed end of a dead stogie clamped tight between his lips, stood at his office window and watched while Grat Coffey, not yet conscious, rolled and muttered on a cot nearby with a bullet hole through his chest.

The end of the Purgatory gang was short, merciless and swift. They were a lot of sidewinders and vinegaroons, best quickly exterminated. Old Tate Deever, his tawny beard waving, led the men from the Buckhorn. Concho Bozeman, his foreman, directed the assault on the rear. Jess Stovall, with Slim Mulvahill, Rojo and Sad Slim Blount, burst into the side door, which had been unhinged and shattered by the blast.

And all came in with blazing guns.

Chape Wingo, the left side of his mouth sagging and twitching, got one Diamond Tail puncher, and wounded another, before he fell, riddled. Sheriff O'Barr, gibbering balderdash and holding up his hands, was dropped in his tracks. "Three-Finger" Kinster sprawled across his wrecked bar, arms hanging limp, blood

trickling from his head. Mosley Horn, District Attorney of Post Oak County, and pudgy Noonan, the county clerk, both went down screaming beneath Chimney Butte guns. There was no such thing as quarter.

"Get 'em all—every mother's son of 'em!" bawled old Tate Deever, his two long Colts smoking. And his hellions did, but not without casualties, for most of the outlaws fought like cornered wolves, knowing themselves dead men anyhow.

Jimble-Jaw Mark Henley, with three bullets in his hump-shouldered body, fired point blank at Jess Stovall when his bloodshot eyes located him in the ruckus. His bullet cut the skin between Jess's left armpit and ribs—gouged out a nasty gash which immediately welled full of blood. But it was his last shot. Swifter than light Stovall's left-hand gun flipped upward, and he sent a bullet smashing into Henley's convulsed white face. And twice more he thumbed hammer before the outlaw chieftain of Purgatory measured his lifeless length on the floor.

A queer sort of silence followed the orgy of slaughter. Men, breathing heavily, looked at one another, holstered their guns. Old Tate, the madness slowly dying out of his puma eyes, glanced around, nodded his head.

"A good day's work," he rumbled. "Their back's busted now all right! Steve, there's a few bottles behind the bar that ain't broke up. Go knock the necks off, and we'll all have one slug a-piece in Little South Hell to celebrate this here occasion. And you, young feller—" he turned to Jess Stovall, who was examining his seared ribs—"I'm appointin' you, right now, instanter, city marshal and actin' sheriff of Six-Shooter Town. Mulvahill and Rojo here, can be yore deputies."

He looked at Jess.

The Diamond Tail waddies let out a loud cheer, but Jess Stovall shook his head firmly.

"Thanks, Mr. Dever, but that bet's off. Me, I'm ridin' away from here in the mornin', I reckon the Brasada will be a sight more salubrious tonight than it's been in many a Saturday, so yuh

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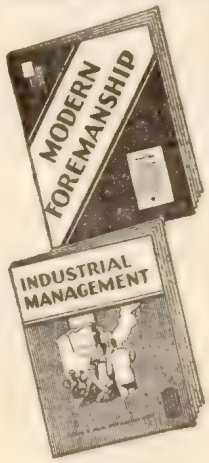

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won't need much lawin' till the Rangers get here. You better take the job yoreself. I've finished what I come here for, and *mañana* I'm ridin' *muy pronto.*"

"Hate to see yuh go," said Deever, raising his glass, "but guess I can't stop yuh. Well, Stovall, here's happy days an' a long life."

Stovall grinned.

"Confusion to the enemy."

ONE drink, and one drink only, the raiders had in the wreckage of Three-Finger Kinster's Little South Hell, before they trooped out and scattered over town. The election polls wouldn't close until six o'clock, and they all intended to vote, and see that everybody else did.

And then happened a spectacular and brave act; an incident tragic in its reckless, futile courage. From far down the street they heard the scattered fire of shots and saw the cloud of dust as a rider bore down on them.

Jess Stovall flipped the twisted brownie into his mouth, touched a match to it. There was a grim light in his battle-worn face as he stepped back into the shelter of the Little South Hell after the others.

This flaming rider might be the leader of some of the Purgatory reinforcements —or he might not. The thunder of hoofs on *caliche* grew louder. There was a quiet moment while the rider reloaded his gun.

And then he was opposite the wrecked saloon. Carefully, one hand supporting his torn and bleeding body in the saddle, he leaned far over, his pistol raised. Someone yelled a warning to Jess. The hammer of the rider's gun came back. And just as a white bloom of smoke spouted from the muzzle, the man relaxed his grip and tumbled in a headlong catapult to the hard street.

No one knew who he was, excepting that he had been one of the Purgatory bunch who had evidently escaped and was playing out his game to the end.

Jess stirred him gently. "Probably figgered he'd be cashin' in all along," he said, "but wanted to go out with his flag wavin'. He did. And went out jest in time, too."

Jess Stovall looked up, then down the street, hitched up his cartridge belt, untied Six-Bits and leading the palomino, walked slowly across town toward the Mosshorn Corral. He was suddenly feeling very tired, and a little sick.

THE sun had just cleared the rugged crests of Packsaddle Mountain when Jess Stovall put foot in his stirrup before Tim Breen's Buzzard Bar. The morning was Sunday, the clear sky a cloudless blue, the air heady and cool. Six-Shooter Town lay bathed in golden light, its dead removed. Only the blackened, battered wreckage of Little South Hell, on the corner, and the bullet-scarred front of the Buckhorn, reminded one of the savage battle of the previous day.

Jess had a last drink at the Buzzard, shook hands with Tim Breen and the crowd of waddies who had gotten up to see him off and slowly mounted his palomino. Slim Mulvahill, his horse face sober, leaned against a post, slowly rolling a querley. His own horse, with warbag and rifle on it, stood tethered nearby.

"Well," said Jess, turning Six-Bits' head, "it was a good war while it lasted, amigos. S'long, and happy days. *Adios*, Slim!"

"Confusion to the enemy!" they chorused. "Good-luck, and lots of it, cowboy. Come back to see us again."

"Don't take no wooden nickels," said Slim.

At the top of the grade leading to the crossing, Jess pulled up his pony a second, looked back. Slim Mulvahill was also looking back, and he held his sombrero high. The men grouped in front of the Buzzard did likewise, the last salute of the range. Jess Stovall's black Stetson shot above his head in a sinewy hand, then he put it back on and lightly touched the palomino with his spurs.

They splashed through Two Burros Crossing and rode westward at an easy lope, straight into the sea of mesquite and greasewood and chaparral. Six-Bits was glad to go—and Jess Stovall was not sorry.

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